Veteran Teachers’ Perceptions of School Principals’ Leadership Influence on School Culture within the Secondary School Setting

by

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Abstract

Educational researchers have noted that school leadership and culture can play an influential role in student success and academic achievement, which is widely considered the ultimate goal of education. This influence is attributed primarily to school culture and only indirectly due to the impact of the principal’s practice. There exists a significant gap in the literature regarding the perspectives of veteran teachers on the functioning and impact of this phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to explore veteran teachers’ perceptions of school principals’ leadership influence on school culture within the secondary school setting. Eight retired teachers, each with over 20 years of teaching experience, were recruited to participate in this study due to their in-depth personal experiences with leadership and school culture throughout their careers. Two rounds of open-ended, semi-structured, individual interviews were completed to elicit participants’ experiences, observations, and opinions with respect to the phenomenon being studied. A system of Pattern coding was used to analyze responses and establish themes. Three main themes emerged from the analysis of the data: a) effective school leadership, which aligned with authentic and transformational leadership models; b) ineffective school leadership, consistent with models of irresponsible leadership; and c) factors mitigating the influence of school leadership on school culture. Practically speaking, positive leadership practices were perceived to be more influential than negative practices, teachers viewed themselves as the gatekeepers of school culture, and reduced autonomy rendered a principal’s potential influence on school culture nearly negligible. By understanding how veteran teachers perceive the leadership practices observed in past principals, future principals can be more effectively recruited and trained to lead, enact positive change in their schools, and improve student success.
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Chapter One

Introduction

“The real role of leadership in education...is not and should not be command and control. The real role of leadership is climate control, creating a climate of possibility” – Sir Ken Robinson

The “climate of possibility” which Sir Ken Robinson is referring to is a positive school culture. For decades, the focus of educational research and reform has been on exerting an external influence on schools through curriculum and policy, neglectful of the potential and impact that school culture can have on students from within (Deal & Peterson, 2010). School culture is a multifaceted entity influenced by a wealth of factors, and capable of exerting an influence on every piece of the school community. Culture is understood to be composed of explicit and implicit shared norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions that shape how people think, feel, and act in schools (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Schein, 1992; Stolp & Smith, 1995). Schein (1992) proposed that this organizational culture can manifest itself at three distinct levels: artifacts – the visible structures and processes of an organization; espoused beliefs – the strategies, goals, and philosophies of an organization, and; basic assumptions – the tacit beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of members of the organization.

This thesis aims to provide insight into both the explicit and implicit influence of school leadership on school culture. A principal has the power to build and shape the culture of a community, touching the lives of not only the students and teachers within their school, but of all stakeholders (Kythreotis et al., 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Lindahl, 2011; Quin et al., 2015). Depending on the leader’s actions, a community can forge strong and lasting bonds and stand united to face any challenges that come its way, or fracture and leave its members exposed
and unprepared for the wider world. When a leader strives to put their community first and demonstrates that they truly care for the wellbeing of their followers, students’ confidence, achievement, and potential flourishing (Nettles & Herrington, 2007; Sun & Leithwood, 2012).

**Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore veteran teachers’ perceptions of school principals’ leadership influence on school culture within the secondary school setting in Ontario. The following research question served to guide this exploration:

1. What are veteran teachers’ perceptions of how their past principals’ explicit and implicit leadership practices, behaviors, policies, styles, and strategies impacted school culture?

**Rationale**

When examining the influence that leadership can exert on school culture, several key variables must be addressed in order to understand how each piece influences and shapes the overall phenomenon. These variables include the value of leadership and the different forms that it can take, and the concept of school culture, its function, and influencers. Finally, a choice must be made regarding the identity of the participants whose perspectives will be used to describe and analyze the phenomenon in question. The rationale for each of these choices is outlined in the following section.

Educational researchers have noted that school leadership and culture can play an influential role in student success and academic achievement, which is widely considered the ultimate goal of education (Heck & Hallinger, 2010; Kythreotis et al., 2010; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). This influence, however, is attributed primarily to school culture and only indirectly due to the impact of the principal’s practice (Quin et al., 2015). Through their leadership styles and
specific practices, principals have been shown to play a major role in the shaping and development of the culture of their schools, which in turn directly and indirectly impacts every aspect of the educational experience (Kythreotis et al., 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Lindahl, 2011; Quin et al., 2015). These leadership styles and practices will be the focal point of the exploration of principals’ influence on school culture within this research.

The concept of school culture is quite broad and all-encompassing of the educational experience – from mission statements and assemblies, clubs and teams, to homework, discipline and safety policies (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Lukasik & Pikula, 2015; Wren, 1999). The messages and values students take away from these experiences play a large role in their socialization as members of the school and society as a whole (Lynch, Lerner, and Leventhal, 2013). Deal and Peterson (2016) argued that the functions and impact of school culture can profoundly influence student success and personal growth, and as such must be prioritized by leadership.

Many studies have demonstrated how the socialization of students is greatly influenced by the impact their teachers have on them as role models, and authority figures (Lumpkin, 2008; Shein & Chiou, 2011). Other studies have explored the effects that various leadership styles of school administrators have on the cultures within their schools (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Sullivan, 2010). However, there exists a significant gap in the literature coupling these concepts and exploring this phenomenon – the influence school leaders exert on the cultures of their schools through the perspective of the most experienced members of the school community, the veteran teachers. Veteran teachers – defined as teachers whose careers have spanned over 20 years – often have the most teaching experience and practical knowledge within a school (Carrillo & Flores, 2018; Day & Gu, 2009; Hargreaves, 2005). As a result of their long careers, veteran teachers are also the members of the school community who
have undergone the most changes in leadership and experienced the impact of various leadership policies and practices. This experience results in well-rounded perspectives on principals’ practices and behaviours, and the effects of such actions on school culture (Day & Gu, 2009). Overall, veteran teachers have been ‘at the heart’ of education the longest and can yield the most insight with respect to the impact of leadership on school culture.

By better understanding how teachers perceive the leadership styles and strategies used by principals we can better train principals to lead, enact change in their schools, and effectively improve student success. When principals understand and appreciate their potential influence, school leadership practices could more effectively be tailored to create and nurture more positive school cultures. In turn, this would promote student learning and enhance the educational experience within their schools (Demirtas, 2010; Gruenert, 2008; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009; Quin et al., 2015; Stolp, 1994). This research study will define and analyze the concept of school culture, review the existing literature into the potential impacts of principals’ behaviours and leadership styles, and finally, explore what veteran teachers perceive to be the true nature of principals’ influences on school culture.

**Autobiographical Signature**

I first became interested in the influence of leadership on school culture as I transitioned from practicum teaching as a Bachelor of Education student, into my first long-term occasional assignments (LTO) as a new graduate of teachers’ college. Having taught at a handful of schools throughout my practicum I had only begun to appreciate just how different the atmosphere could be from one building, or even from one classroom, to the next. I had always attributed this difference to the teacher, as I could see how each teachers’ personal routines, mannerisms, and preferences impacted the classroom environment. It was only once I had a class of my own that I
began to understand that there were many more aspects to student behaviours and the classroom environment than could be attributed solely to my own influence as a teacher. With each new LTO assignment, I became more aware of subtle, but schoolwide differences in the dynamics and mannerisms of both staff and students. It was not just my new class that had a different character, but rather a common culture seemed to permeate through most of the classes in each school.

What really began to call my attention to the root cause of this phenomenon were the conversations between teachers in the staffroom. In each new school, invariably the staffroom discourse would eventually turn towards critiques or praises of the school leadership – the principal and vice-principals. What was most interesting about each of these conversations was that the characteristics the teachers mentioned, whether positive or negative, would implicitly be linked to the atmosphere of the school and the behaviours of the students. Where a principal was being critiqued for being too easy-going, the students were seen taking more risks and pushing the envelope of bad behaviour more often. Where a principal was said to focus solely on literacy and numeracy initiatives, school spirit was lower and the performance of school teams, as well as attendance at extracurricular clubs suffered as a consequence.

My experiences in relation to this palpable effect of leadership on the culture operating within schools ultimately led me to pursue a Master of Education degree and to delve into research on this subject in order to better understand and describe the phenomenon at work. Having now taught for the better part of eight years, I have begun to consider the possibility of becoming a principal at some point in my career. My hope is that my research will shed light on the depth of influence school leaders have and how they can best harness this influence to create a more positive and nurturing learning environment. I hope that I will personally be able to use
the lessons learned from this experience and put them towards my own professional
development, wherever my future career path leads me.

**Definitions of Terms**

**Leadership**

For the purposes of this study, leadership was defined as “a process whereby an
individual influences another group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2016,
p. 6).

**School Culture**

School culture is defined as “complex webs of traditions and rituals that have been built
up over time as teachers, students, parents, and administrators work together and deal with crises
and accomplishments” (Deal & Peterson, 2016, p. 4).

**Effective Leadership**

Leadership which positively impacts school culture and is viewed as beneficial and
constructive to the school community (Kythreotis et al., 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006;
Lindahl, 2011; Quin et al., 2015).

**Ineffective Leadership**

Leadership which veteran teachers regarded as detrimental or negative to the overall
school culture.

**Veteran Teacher**

A teacher with a minimum 20 years of teaching experience, who has not held a leadership
position such as principal or vice principal, and has retired from the profession (Carrillo &
Flores, 2018; Meister & Ahrens, 2011; Orlando, 2014).
School Leadership

Designates the official acting principal or vice principal of a given school.

School Administration

Designates the official acting principal or vice principal of a given school.

Practice

The explicit or implicit application or use of an idea, behaviour, strategy, belief, policy, style, or method.

Overview of the Thesis

Chapter One provided the introduction, rationale, purpose, and definitions of key terms for this research, along with an autobiographical signature. Chapter Two is an overview of the relevant literature pertaining to school culture, the value of veteran teachers, and the significance and influence of various leadership styles in school principals. Chapter Three reviews the methods and methodologies applied to both generate and analyze this research. Following this, Chapter Four presents the findings from the individual interviews, which have been broken down into three main themes. Coupling the findings with current literature on the subject, Chapter Five is a discussion of the conclusions, implications, and future considerations of research in this area within the field of education.
Chapter Two  
Review of the Literature  

This chapter provides an overview of the relevant literature pertaining to models of leadership, concepts of school culture, and the value of veteran teachers’ experience. The mutual influence of each of these topics on one another is the driving force behind this literature review, and the overall thesis. Teachers influence school culture, which in turn influences leadership, which then influences teachers, and vice versa. Each of these factors plays a large role in shaping and developing students within the educational system, and as such are of vital importance to student success. This review will first explore the value of veteran teachers’ perceptions as opposed to those of novice teachers. This will be followed by an overview of the value and influence of leadership with an emphasis on authentic and transformational leadership models. Thirdly, Deal and Peterson’s (2016) definition of school culture will be examined as a framework for identifying and understanding both the culture present within schools and the factors which have the greatest impact on this culture.  

Veteran Teachers  

‘Veteran teachers’ are a frequently referenced group in education literature, but what does this term actually mean? This question is difficult to address as there is little consensus on a definition of veteran teachers within the literature. Many scholars use the term colloquially, referring broadly to teachers who have practiced long enough to no longer be considered ‘new’ or ‘novice’ teachers (Nichols & Zhang, 2011; Veldman, Van Tartwijk, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2013). Others set a minimum to the years served in the profession, with that number ranging anywhere from five (Rumschlag, 2017), to over twenty years (Hughes, 2012). For the purposes of this study, the term ‘veteran teachers’ is defined as: a teacher with a minimum 20 years of
teaching experience, who has not held a leadership position such as principal or vice principal, and has retired from the profession (Carrillo & Flores, 2018; Meister & Ahrens, 2011; Orlando, 2014). The choice to include only retired teachers was to limit response bias and avoid potential ethical conflicts (more on this in chapter 3). Given this definition, we will now explore the features that set veteran teachers apart from novice teachers and why their perceptions were the focus of this research.

There are many schools of thought regarding the benefits of using veteran teachers as a source of information in qualitative research studies. Some scholars suggest that veteran teachers possess more confidence in their classroom management skills and are more effective at meeting curricular goals, thereby freeing up more time for them to focus on matters outside of their own classroom, such as social and personal relationships (Rich & Almozlino, 1999; Thorburn, 2011). Novice teachers, meanwhile, are concerned with their employment status, and as such focus on academic matters and issues within their own classroom in order to give themselves the greatest chance at being rehired (Caspersen & Raaen, 2014; Rich & Almozlino, 1999). The many challenges novice teachers face within their own classrooms cause them to be less attuned to the complex workings of the school culture operating outside their classroom walls (Cherubini, 2009; Fultz & Gimbert, 2009). These challenges include classroom management (Boreen & Niday, 2000), difficult subject combinations (Tait, 2008), lesson planning (Westerman, 1991), time management (Robertson, 2006), and lack of resources and support (Chubbuck, 2001). On top of the many challenges new teachers face, they are also more heavily influenced by their school’s culture (Cherubini, 2009). School culture exerts a socializing influence on novice teachers, teaching them the unwritten expectations of the school through their interactions with other staff. Conversely, veteran teachers play a larger role as the socializing force within a
school, and having experienced this phenomenon from both sides, are more capable of describing the influence and composition of the school culture itself more accurately (Holland, 2009).

Beyond the challenges faced within the classroom, another aspect in which novice and veteran teachers differ is in their experience and interactions with school leadership. Principals have been shown to play a vital role in the induction of new teachers into their schools through their support, encouragement, and guidance (Cherian & Daniel, 2008; Fultz & Gimbert, 2009; Wood, 2005). The relationship between principals and teachers changes as a teacher’s tenure extends, with communication between the groups declining as teachers mature (Gimble, 2011). However, despite the decline in communication, veteran teachers have undergone more leadership changes and experienced the impact of various leadership policies and practices throughout their careers, leading to more well-rounded perspectives on principals’ routines and behaviours, and the effects of such actions on school culture (Day & Gu, 2009). Often, veteran teachers have the most wisdom and teaching expertise within a school (Carrillo & Flores, 2018; Day & Gu, 2009; Hargreaves, 2005). They have faced and overcome adversity in their careers and learned many things from their years of experience (Day & Gu, 2009). Overall, veteran teachers have had the time to appreciate many aspects of teaching beyond simply their classroom, they have worked with a number of different leaders, and having been ‘in the trenches’ of education the longest, have the most to offer with respect to the impact of leadership on school culture.

**Leadership**

Northouse (2016) stated that “there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it” (p. 2). Although leadership can be difficult to
define, Northouse ultimately established that “leadership [is] a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 6). For the purposes of this study, this definition will be applied to examine the leadership styles of school principals, focusing primarily on their capacity to influence school culture and affect student achievement.

**Why does leadership matter?** Some researchers in the educational field have noted that school leadership and culture can play a role in influencing student success and academic achievement, which is widely considered the ultimate goal of education (Heck & Hallinger, 2010; Kythreotis et al., 2010; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). This influence, however, is attributed more to school culture than to the direct impact of the principal’s practice (Quin et al., 2015). Principals have been shown to play a major role in shaping and developing the culture of their schools, through both their leadership practices and specific leadership styles, which in turn directly and indirectly impact every aspect of the schooling experience (Kythreotis et al., 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Lindahl, 2011; Quin et al., 2015). These leadership practices and styles are the focal point of the interviews undertaken with veteran teachers. Since there are too many leadership styles to adequately summarize in one paper, the analysis of this literature review will concentrate on the two leadership styles that are most relevant to this thesis: authentic leadership and transformational leadership. These styles were chosen due to their inherent relationship to each other and to school culture (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011; Karada & Öztekin, 2018; Ngang, 2011). Authentic leadership is an important aspect of being a principal as they must always model proper behaviours since their actions are constantly relaying implicit messages to the school community (Karada & Öztekin, 2018; Stolp, 1994). A principal who shows care and concern in all their interactions is more likely to nurture a culture of collaboration and inclusiveness than a principal who is frequently unavailable or callous.
(Stolp, 1994). Similarly, transformational leadership focuses on the use of collaboration to change school culture thereby inspiring greater productivity and satisfaction from both principals and teachers (Dumay & Galand, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). This form of leadership requires a principal to have an intimate knowledge and understanding of the various areas of need within their school as they aim to satisfy the needs of their staff and instill a sense of pride and value in their work (Northouse, 2016). The characteristics of both authentic and transformational leadership will be explored in greater detail to help clarify how they play a role in school leadership and culture.

**Authentic leadership.** Authentic leadership focuses on whether leadership in a given scenario is genuine or ‘real’ (Northouse, 2016). People are intuitively drawn to leaders whom they feel they can trust, whom they perceive as honest and good. As such, this model of leadership has been demonstrated to have a positive effect on school culture and teacher job satisfaction (Drace, 2019; Karada & Oztekin, 2018). The need for authentic leadership is more critical now than in recent memory, as is evidenced by the current state of world affairs, and the rise of ‘fake news’; instances of lies and deceit being at the forefront of much that we see in the media today (Izzatt-White, Carroll, Gardiner, & Kempster, 2019).

The definition of authentic leadership varies with perspective; the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, and the developmental perspectives (Northouse, 2016). The intrapersonal perspective of authentic leadership focuses on the leader’s perception of themselves – who they believe they are – and the accuracy of that perception (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). An authentic leader is genuine in their leadership in the sense that they lead because it is an innate quality that they possess, not a role that is imposed upon them based on the position or title they hold (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Waite, McKinney, Smith-Glasgow, & Meloy,
Similarly, they did not pursue leadership positions for the rank or reward, but rather as a means to achieve a goal that they are passionate about (Gardner et al., 2011; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Self-concept is a key attribute with respect to authenticity. The more insightful an individual is regarding their own attributes – understanding their strengths and weaknesses, their limitations, their ability to self-regulate, and their ability to self-evaluate – the stronger a leader they will be (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Gardner et al., 2011; Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

The interpersonal perspective of authentic leadership addresses the relationship between leaders' actions and followers' reactions toward leaders and the values they model (Eagly, 2005; Liu, Liao, & Wei, 2015). It is an approach based on a reciprocal process of relationship building. The leader must both possess good values and openly promote them to their followers through their actions, and the followers must find resonance with the values being conveyed and accept them in order to work effectively and efficiently together (Eagly, 2005; Hassan & Ahmed, 2011).

Lastly, the developmental perspective is one in which the leader, through their behaviours, strives to “foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development” (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008, p. 94). Self-awareness is summarized as the leader’s knowledge and acknowledgement of their strengths and weaknesses, their insights about themselves as a person, and their ability to not only be aware of their thoughts, opinions, and feelings on a subject, but also to trust those insights and act upon them (Gardner et al., 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Internalized moral perspective refers to the leader’s propensity to be guided by their own inherent moral standards and values, and not be influenced or misdirected by outside pressures (Lui et al., 2015; Walumbwa et al., 2008). It also refers to ‘practicing what you preach’, being
able to live as an example of the values you hold dear. Balanced processing refers to a leader’s ability to self-regulate their tendencies and behaviours to do what is right (Liu et al., 2015; Walumbwa et al., 2008). This also encompasses an authentic leader’s capacity to avoid favoritism and actively seek out and consider opposing viewpoints when making decisions (Gardner et al., 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2008; Walumbwa & Wernsing, 2013). Finally, relational transparency is a leader’s affinity for being open and honest when assessing themselves, as well as presenting themselves to others (Gardner et al., 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2008). This is extremely important since any dissonance in how leaders are perceived and how they present themselves will ultimately lead to a breach of trust and a collapse of this leadership style (Northouse, 2016).

A principal who models behaviours that are sincere and reflect their deeply held values, will in turn positively impact the mindset of their staff, leading to higher teacher retention rates and a more inclusive and cohesive school culture (Bird, Wang, Watson, & Murray, 2012; Feng, 2016). These authentic leaders who work together with their staff and encourage teacher collaboration have been shown to also positively impact both teacher motivation and student achievement (Goddard et al., 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). This idea of empowerment and collaboration is at the heart of the second style of leadership that will be discussed – transformational leadership.

**Transformational leadership.** Transformational leadership describes a model in which a leader is concerned with the needs of their followers and, through role modeling and the forging of personal connections, enacts change in order to enable their followers to feel empowered and achieve their full potential (Northouse, 2016; Stewart, 2006). This model of leadership is worthy of particular note for three reasons: 1) it is one of the most popular and frequently studied models
of leadership; 2) it has been linked to effecting changes in an organization’s culture; 3) it has been shown to improve teaching and learning from both the administrative and teaching perspective (Heck & Hallinger, 1999; Northouse, 2016; Stewart, 2006).

Though the term transformational leadership was first coined by James V. Downton (1973), this model of leadership only truly gained traction through the work of James MacGregor Burns (1978). His contributions to transformational leadership, along with the evolution of this model of leadership through the efforts of Bernard Bass (1998), Bruce Avolio (1998), and Kenneth Leithwood (1994), has shaped the model that we use today.

Burns (1978) began the discussion on transformational leadership by separating this model from most other forms of leadership, which he deemed to be transactional. Transactional leadership refers to the exchange of things of value between leaders and followers, without any attention being paid to the development of relationships or betterment of the participants involved (Kuhnert, 1994). A reward or punishment is given depending on the outcome of the followers’ actions, and the exchange is completed (Northouse, 2016). Transformational leadership, Burns (1978) argued, moves beyond this simple unidirectional exchange by having the leader motivate, engage, and empower their followers, thereby helping them reach their fullest potential. The personal attributes that a leader must possess in order to accomplish this lofty goal are charisma, trust, and high moral standards (Northouse, 2016). Burns (1978) argued that the strength of leadership lies not in a power differential, but rather in the transformative relationships between leaders and followers which enables both parties to be elevated and inspired to fulfil their mutual needs and goals. When a person transcends the transactional stage and becomes a transformational leader, they have the potential to become instruments of major social change (Stewart, 2006).
Like Burns, Bass (1985) believed that transformational leadership was a separate and more sophisticated style of leadership compared to most other styles. He expanded upon Burns’ model by outlining a continuum of three leadership styles: 1) transformational leaders, 2) transactional leaders, and 3) non-leaders. Within this structure he identified four factors which a leader will exhibit in order to be classified as a true transformational leader, two transactional leadership factors, and one non-leadership factor. The four transformational leadership factors are outlined here:

*Charismatic Leadership, or Idealized Influence.* These leaders exhibit many of the qualities outlined in authentic leadership; they are role models and hold themselves to high moral and ethical standards. Followers identify with these leaders, respect them, and want to mimic them.

*Inspirational Motivation.* This factor describes the ability of these leaders to inspire their followers to reach beyond their own self-interests and achieve higher goals. Leaders are capable of clearly communicating and outlining their expectations and motivating the group to work together towards a shared vision.

*Intellectual Stimulation.* Transformational leaders encourage and support their followers in finding creative and innovative solutions to their organization’s problems. They are open to new ideas and willing to adapt to challenges as they present themselves.

*Individualized Consideration.* These leaders nurture a supportive climate in which they listen to the needs of their followers and tailor their interactions with each person in order to best serve that individual and aid in their development (Bass, 1998).

While Burns and Bass were instrumental in developing transformational leadership as a leadership model, it was Kenneth Leithwood and his colleagues who are credited for applying
this model to the realm of educational administration (Stewart, 2006). Leithwood argues that within education, this model of leadership can aid in creating and transforming school culture and positively influencing student engagement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). This model assumes that the principal is working alongside teachers in a synergistic relationship similar to distributive leadership, exchanging ideas and supporting each other’s visions for achieving student success and improving the school community (Stewart, 2006). Leithwood (2006) argues that transformational leaders in education all share three broad dimensions of practice:

*Redesigning the Organization:* the development of a collaborative and productive school culture.

*Developing People:* continual professional development, supported by the leader and modeled through their practices and values.

*Setting Directions:* creating a shared vision for the school and communicating high performance expectations to all stakeholders.

Comparing the two, one can easily observe a strong correlation between Leithwood’s (2006) dimensions of practice and Bass’ (1998) four factors of transformational leadership. Though the model of transformational leadership continues to evolve, it has shown great promise in both its ability to transform the culture of a school and correlate positively to student learning, and as such is of particular interest as we explore teachers’ perceptions of principals’ leadership styles and how they impacted school culture (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Stewart, 2006).
School Culture

Before one can begin a discussion on the definition of school culture, culture itself must be defined. Schein (1985) provides one of the most widely accepted definitions of culture, explaining it as:

“a pattern of basic assumptions – invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with problems…that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (p. 9).

Scholars have applied this definition of culture to the educational setting in various ways. School culture is frequently used interchangeably with school climate in casual conversation, but the two terms refer to very distinct concepts. Gruenert (2008) defined school culture as the common expectations or unwritten rules which govern good standing within a group, while presenting school climate as the attitude of an institution. MacNeil et al. (2009) stated that school climate should be approached from a psychological perspective, basing it more on the behaviours of members of the school community, while school culture should be approached from an anthropological perspective, regarding it as the shared values and norms of that group. The work of Deal and Peterson (2016) built directly upon Schein’s definition of culture, by defining school culture as “complex webs of traditions and rituals that have been built up over time as teachers, students, parents, and administrators work together and deal with crises and accomplishments” (p. 4). Meanwhile, Spicer (2016) expanded on the concept of school climate by stating that climate is something that can be ‘felt’ within a school and is linked to stakeholders’ perceptions of the working environment and the formal and informal organization of the school. The overarching theme that emerges through all these definitions is that school climate is seen to be
one of the ways in which school culture is manifested. Culture is the larger, enveloping concept which is deeply ingrained within a school and difficult to change, while climate is more superficial, context dependent and volatile (Gruenert, 2008). Given their prominence in the field of educational leadership and culture, and the all-encompassing nature of their works, the Deal and Peterson (2016) definition of school culture will be used as the standard throughout this thesis.

**Why does school culture matter?** As is clear from the definitions of school culture, it is a phenomenon that permeates all aspects of the school experience. Therefore, it is important to appreciate how this culture is created and how it evolves. School culture is ingrained in every aspect of schooling – from mission statements, mottos, the existence and nature of school field trips, assemblies, inter- and intra-scholastic competitions, clubs and teams, to homework, discipline and safety policies (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Lukasik & Pikula, 2015; Wren, 1999). The messages and values learned through these experiences become norms which are internalized by students, leading to their socialization as members of the school society (Lynch, Lerner, & Leventhal, 2013). Deal and Peterson (2016) contended that the functions and impact of school culture are far-reaching thus we must be aware and appreciative of how it impacts student success and personal growth. Here we will explore the six ways in which culture influences the school experience according to their model.

**Culture fosters school effectiveness and productivity.** A positive and collaborative school culture has been correlated to increased motivation, productivity and job satisfaction on the part of teachers (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Stolp, 1994; Sullivan, 2010). When teachers feel the culture of the school is aligned with their own ideologies, promotes collaboration across the organizational hierarchy, and is united in its purpose, they are far more likely to be happy and
effective in their work (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Stolp, 1994; Sullivan, 2010). This in turn, influences student achievement, as happier and more motivated teachers are proven to produce higher quality instruction and enhance student performance (Gruenert, 2008; MacNeil et al., 2009).

*Culture improves collegial and collaborative activities that foster better communication and problem-solving practices.* A positive school culture has been shown to foster the exchange of ideas and resources between teachers, leading to more effective problem-solving and enhanced professional development (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Lam, Yim, & Lam, 2002; Teasley, 2017). Not only is there a correlation between collaboration and teacher efficacy, but studies have shown that the amount of collaboration and teacher efficacy is predictive of student achievement as well (Cowley & Meehan, 2001; Puchner & Taylor, 2006; Teasley, 2017).

*Culture fosters successful change and improvement efforts.* A collaborative and collegial school culture, coupled with a supportive administration that encourages risk-taking and innovation, will be more likely to continually improve and reinvent itself to suit the ever-changing needs of its students (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Hargreaves, 1995; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Conversely, toxic school cultures – which are characterized by negative, apathetic, and fragmented staff – will cling to traditional approaches and resist innovation and change (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

*Culture builds commitment and identification of staff, students, and administrators.* A culture which builds a sense of community within the school will show increased motivation and commitment from all stakeholders (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Kiral & Kacar, 2016). In addition, schools where this culture is reinforced by clear missions, visions and values are more likely to see an increase in student engagement and achievement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Stewart,
This link between student achievement and school culture is expanded upon by MacNeil et al. (2009), who compared students’ standardized test results to survey responses by teachers regarding school culture. Overall, students who attended a school with a strong and healthy culture achieved significantly higher results on the standardized testing than students from schools with reportedly poorer cultures and learning environments (MacNeil et al., 2009).

*Culture amplifies the energy, motivation, and vitality of a school’s staff, students, and community.* The emotional and psychological wellbeing of all members of a school community will be profoundly influenced by the culture of their school (Aelterman et al., 2007; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2011). This will be the case in both the positive and negative sense, with all stakeholders gradually taking on the dominant characteristics of their school’s culture in a continual feedback loop and eventually becoming entrenched in this attitude (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). Principals’ practices have been shown to significantly impact the development and maintenance of school culture. In turn, positive school culture was shown to correlate strongly with increased student achievement (Lindahl, 2011; Quin et al., 2015; Sahin, 2011).

*Culture increases the focus of daily behaviour and attention on what is important and valued.* The influences of school culture are not just overt and can be tied to the functioning of the hidden curriculum (Cubukcu, 2012; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Wren, 1999). The unwritten rules and unstated assumptions and expectations of a school can shed light on where its true values lie and have a profound influence on the quality of education within that school (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

**Factors affecting school culture.** Among the studies demonstrating the importance of school culture and its influences on student learning, there have been several scholars who have
suggested methods by which this culture can be tailored to better effectuate its positive effects. Clark (1972) argued that a culture can only change under one of the following three conditions: 1) when a new organization or school is first created, 2) when the existing school is receptive to cultural evolution, or 3) when a crisis necessitates a reevaluation and remodeling of the existing culture. It is universally held that regardless of the condition met, the first step in the process of changing the culture of a school is to identify the existing culture of the school before reforms are attempted (Deal & Peterson, 2016; MacNeil et al., 2009; Spicer, 2016; Stolp, 1994). As mentioned, school artifacts, such as routines, traditions, and ceremonies, can all provide insight as to the true nature of a school’s culture. Educational reform efforts of the past “have failed to improve student achievement in schools because they failed to adequately address the importance of the culture and climate of schools” (MacNeil et al., 2009, p. 75). Implementation of any policy or strategy will always be mediated and influenced by the culture and climate of the school in question, and therefore real and sustained change can only occur when these factors are prioritized (MacNeil et al., 2009). Deal and Peterson (2016) propose several ways in which school leaders can help shape the culture of their schools, and in doing so make a greater impact on student learning and achievement.

*Develop a student-centered mission and purpose that motivates all stakeholders.* Leaders who reinforce their vision for their school’s culture with a strong mission and values, and who also inspire autonomous motivation in their staff, will positively affect student engagement and achievement (Eyal & Roth, 2011; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Stolp, 1994). The principal plays a major role in fostering a sense of community between all stakeholders, and in nurturing the working relationships that enable this collaboration to effectively implement changes (Fullan, 2007; Hinde, 2004; Spicer, 2016).
Highlight and strengthen the positive elements of the existing culture. The preexisting culture of a school will have a profound influence on any attempts at reform, and therefore positive elements of this culture must be validated and supported in order to ease any transition towards a new culture (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Gordon & Patterson, 2008; Kaplan & Owings, 2013).

Use the established traditions and values as a framework onto which new elements can be added. In order to identify and expose the strengths and weaknesses of the current environment, while at the same time laying the foundations of what the new culture could become, leaders should collaborate with all stakeholders. All participants should be encouraged to express their interpretations of both the existing culture, and their vision for its future (Hinde, 2004; Kaplan & Owings, 2013; Stolp, 1994).

Recruit and support staff who share the vision and values of the desired culture. As the primary socializing agents of the school, teachers play a vital role in shaping and influencing the culture of their schools (Holland, 2009; Muhammad, 2009; Roby, 2011). Selecting, supporting, and empowering the staff who share the leader’s vision for the reforms in school culture can ease the transformation process (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Given et al., 2009).

Use the history of the school to reinforce important values and beliefs. Traditions, values, and beliefs rooted in the history of the school act as an anchor for school culture. Principals who can nourish the positive elements of that heritage will be able to lay the foundations for a strong school culture (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

Endorse the core values, norms, and beliefs through everything the school does. For cultural reforms to be successfully implemented, the school should only address a few specific areas of need at a time. Setting more pragmatic goals allows leaders to focus entirely on the
development of these areas and the elimination of incoherence to the set goals (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

Chapter Summary

The fundamental reason for delving into any topic within the field of education is to shed more light on the key factors and issues within it, and ultimately improve education as a whole in order to better suit the needs of the students within the system. This literature review has outlined the value of veteran teachers’ perspectives on educational matters as well as the main facets of authentic and transformational leadership models and the influence they exert in an educational setting. Moreover, the core elements of school culture were explored, including factors that determine how the culture of a school is established and restructured. Though each of these themes have been shown to have an impact on student learning and achievement individually, the perspective of veteran teachers on the influence of leadership on school culture has yet to be explored in the literature. This study aims to provide insight into both the explicit and implicit influence of school leadership on the culture of their schools. A principal has the power to build and shape a community, touching the lives of not only the students and teachers within their school, but of all stakeholders. Depending on the leader’s actions, a community can forge strong and lasting bonds and stand united to face any challenges that come its way, or fracture and leave its members exposed and unprepared for the wider world. When a leader does everything in their power to put their community first, and to show they truly care for the wellbeing of their followers, confidence, achievement, and potential flourish.

By better understanding how teachers perceive the leadership styles and strategies used by principals we can better train principals to lead, enact change in their schools and effectively improve student success. When principals are aware of their potential influence, school
leadership could more effectively tailor their practices to create and nurture more positive school cultures, which would in turn help promote student learning and develop the educational experience within their schools (Demirtas, 2010; Gruenert, 2008; MacNeil, Prater & Busch, 2009; Quin et al., 2015; Stolp, 1994).
Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter will provide a detailed description of the research methods employed to perform this qualitative study. A hermeneutical phenomenology approach coupled with a social constructivist framework was utilized to derive and interpret the meaning behind the participants’ perspectives of leadership’s influence on school culture. Eight retired teachers, each with over 20 years of teaching experience, were recruited to participate in this study due to their in-depth personal experiences with leadership and school culture throughout their careers. Two rounds of open-ended, semi-structured, individual interviews were completed to elicit participants’ experiences, observations, and opinions with respect to the phenomenon being studied. A system of Pattern coding was used to analyze responses and establish themes. These themes were consistent with the research questions and helped frame the conclusions drawn from this research. This chapter will provide rationale and justification for the research design and methods used to perform participant recruitment and selection, data collection, and data analysis. The strategies used to ensure validity and trustworthiness in the results will also be described.

Research Design

Phenomenological methodology. The aim of this research was to explore veteran teachers’ perspectives of how their principals’ leadership styles influenced school culture in the secondary setting. Based on this goal, a qualitative research approach was selected. Creswell (2013) argues that qualitative research is conducted when a problem needs to be explored in depth, when variables cannot easily be identified or measured, and when we want to develop a comprehensive understanding of the context and meaning people bring to a phenomenon. Within qualitative inquiry, a phenomenological approach emphasizes the description and exploration of
the common meaning attributed by several individuals to their experiences of a single concept, or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Laverty, 2003). This description consists of both what the individuals experienced and the meaning they have attributed to the phenomenon as they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological approach was the most appropriate methodology for addressing veteran teachers’ perspectives of their principals’ influence on school culture due to the clear need to explore and describe the overall essence of the teachers’ lived experiences of this phenomenon. More specifically, a hermeneutic phenomenology approach was chosen, as this study focuses both on participants’ descriptions of their lived experiences of the phenomenon, and my interpretation as a researcher of the meaning of these experiences, based on my theoretical and personal knowledge (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Creswell John, 2013; Laverty, 2003; Van Manen, 1990). Whereas a standard phenomenological approach requires the bracketing of the researcher’s experiences in an attempt to set aside personal biases, a hermeneutical approach allows investigators to use personal experiences and knowledge to interpret the issues being explored (Laverty, 2003). The use of a hermeneutic approach is consistent with the study’s interpretive framework of social constructivism, since both hermeneutics and constructivists support the perspective that knowledge and understanding are constructed and altered by the knower, and the researcher is therefore a central participant in their own research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Laverty, 2003).

**Interpretive framework.** The principles of social constructivism have been applied to this study to interpret results in a way that encompasses participants’ shared perceptions of leadership’s influence on school culture. This framework lends itself well to phenomenological studies as it deals directly with how individuals “develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24), based on their own personal histories and upbringings. The
concept of social constructivism was first introduced by John Dewey in 1897 while outlining his pedagogic creed. According to Dewey (2013), school is a form of community within which learners socially construct knowledge using language as the mediating tool. Vygotsky (1986) and Foucault (1971) further elaborated on this concept by arguing that language is the key to learners’ construction of knowledge, and to the very nature of human consciousness itself. These researchers argue that knowledge is constructed through the social interactions between individuals and the meanings individuals attribute to these experiences (Andrews, 2012). Social constructivism focuses primarily with how the everyday social practices of individuals shape their perceived realities (Andrews, 2012). The use of broad, open-ended interview questions within this thesis allowed participants to elaborate fully on their experiences and enabled the development of a comprehensive representation of their perceptions of the essence of leadership’s influence on school culture.

A clear parallel can be drawn between this form of socially constructed meaning-making, and school culture. Both the framework and this topic deal with socially negotiated lessons that are implicitly learned and developed by the individuals in question as they experience life. The goal of social constructivism is to gather and interpret these perceptions into a structured pattern of meaning, to ultimately uncover the essence of an experience, as a phenomenological study would (Creswell, 2013). In this respect, the research topic, as well as the methodological strategies and interpretative framework employed naturally complement and enhance one another.

**Participant Recruitment and Selection**

The participants who were recruited for this study had to meet the following the inclusion criteria: a minimum of 20 years of teaching experience in the Ontario secondary school setting,
never having held an administrative (vice principal or principal) position, having undergone several leadership changes throughout their careers, and having retired from the teaching profession. The participants were recruited via snowball sampling beginning with a convenience sample of two teachers from the primary investigator’s personal network of contacts. This method of convenience sampling followed by snowball sampling was utilized as there is no accessible database of retired teachers and privacy laws make it difficult to obtain the contact information of retired teachers through other means.

Participants were contacted via email invitation, which included the letter of information and consent form. If candidates were interested in participating in the study, they were asked to respond to the email providing their availability for an in-person one-hour interview. These participants were well suited for an exploration of the influence of leadership on school culture as they had all personally experienced it on various occasions through their twenty-plus year tenures. It was initially estimated that eight to ten participants would be required to reach ‘data saturation’. An abbreviated interim data analysis was performed after six participants at which point it was felt that no new themes were emerging from the evidence. Therefore, only two more participants were recruited. This total of eight participants allowed for a detailed exploration of the phenomenon from multiple diverse perspectives (Boddy, 2016; Creswell, 2013). Participants had worked in both the Catholic and public school boards within Southwestern Ontario. Efforts were made to include a diverse group of participants with experience teaching a broad range subjects within the constraints of the sampling methods and the local area demographics. Two participants were female, and though not directly asked, no participants requested to be addressed by a non-gender specific pronoun or volunteered that they are the part of the LGBTQ community. Seven participants were Caucasian and one Asian. Having a wide variety of genders,
teaching specialties and school boards represented by the participants helped to mitigate sources of bias within the research. During the transcription process, all participants, schools, school boards, and cities were given a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the participants. This is described in detail in the ethical considerations section of this chapter.

**Participant Profiles**

*Participant #1: Adam*

Male with 24.5 years of high school teaching experience at a total of four different schools in the (public/Catholic school board) in Southwestern Ontario. Taught primarily construction and design. Extracurricular involvement included coaching hockey.

*Participant #2: Carly*

Female with 28 years of high school teaching experience at a total of three different schools in the (public/Catholic school board) in Southwestern Ontario. Taught primarily business, computer technology and special education. Extracurricular involvement included assisting with the school band and musicals.

*Participant #3: Emma*

Female with 20 years of teaching experience at multiple schools in the (public/Catholic school board) in Southwestern Ontario. Taught primarily secondary school French Immersion.

*Participant #4: Gabriel*

Male with 30 years of high school teaching experience at a total of three different schools in the (public/Catholic school board) in Southwestern Ontario. Taught primarily chemistry and physics. Extracurricular involvement included coaching soccer, volleyball, and curling.
Participant #5: Ned Law
Male with 26 years of high school teaching experience at a total of four different schools in the (public/Catholic school board) in Southwestern Ontario. Taught primarily music, business, and religion. Extracurricular involvement included assisting with school plays and musicals, coaching badminton, and curling.

Participant #6: Kayden
Male with 31 years of high school teaching experience at a total of four different schools in the (public/Catholic school board) in Southwestern Ontario. Taught primarily science, physical education, and special education. Extracurricular involvement included coaching track and field.

Participant #7: Michael
Male with 31 years of high school teaching experience at one school in the (public/Catholic school board) in Southwestern Ontario. Taught primarily science, math, and co-op. Extracurricular involvement included coaching track and field.

Participant #8: Oliver
Male with 35 years of high school teaching experience at a total of six different schools in the (public/Catholic school board) in Southwestern Ontario. Taught primarily music and English. Extracurricular involvement included assisting with the school choir, band, and theatre productions.

Individual Interview Method

Interviewing is a valuable tool for qualitative research that provides both interviewees’ perspectives of their experiences as well as their emotions and understanding of those situations. When conducting phenomenological research, Creswell (2013, p. 81) states that the optimal technique for data collection involves “in-depth and multiple interviews with participants” who
have first-hand experience of the phenomenon in question. Interviewing can draw out participants’ interpretations of an event or phenomenon, as respondents have the flexibility to structure their responses in ways which are meaningful to them (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). When attempting to tease out participants’ socially constructed perceptions of a phenomenon, Qu and Dumay (2011) suggest semi-structured, and/or open-ended interviews be used.

When collecting first-hand data from people based on their experiences, interviews can be conducted either in focus groups or individual, one-on-one, interviews. Research suggests that individual interviews are more successful at probing deeper into a specific topic, particularly one that can be sensitive or emotional; whereas focus groups are better suited to research that intends to explore a more general concept or wide range of topics (Crabtree, Yanoshik, Miller, & O’Connor, 1993; Guest et al., 2013; Kaplowitz, 2000). Group dynamics may modify individual responses as social pressures prevent certain opinions from being expressed and consequently there is a high risk of missing out on key elements of the phenomenon being researched (Crabtree et al., 2003; Kaplowitz, 2000). This phenomenon is known as social desirability bias (Grimm, 2010). In order to mitigate biases inherent to focus groups, and to explore the specific subject of veteran teachers’ experiences with leadership, individual, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were deemed the most appropriate method for data collection. These methods are still not entirely free of social desirability bias but will be impacted to a lesser extent than other qualitative methods available to carry out the research (Bergen & Labonté, 2020; Grimm, 2010).

As described above, data were obtained through multiple one-on-one interviews that took place in mutually convenient locations. Participants were provided with a letter of information (Appendix A) and signed a consent form in addition to giving verbal consent at the
commencement of each interview. All interviews were recorded using the Audipo application and fieldnotes, and memos were used as a back-up to record any additional observations throughout the process. The first interview was conducted using a standardized open-ended interview guide (Appendix B). The questions within the first interview were relatively broad in their scope so as to allow the participants to develop their accounts of their experiences freely (Creswell, 2013). The two main topics addressed in the interview were: 1) the participants’ descriptions of their experiences with principals’ influences on school culture, and 2) the contexts which may have influenced these experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Questions were standardized to ensure that the same general themes were being explored with each participant, that interview time was being used efficiently, and to facilitate analysis of the responses (Patton, 2002). Probing questions were added when necessary to help clarify or expand upon participants’ answers (Patton, 2002). Upon completion of the first round of eight interviews, all responses were transcribed then analyzed via exploratory thematic analysis. Through this analysis process several categories and themes were identified in the shared experiences of the participants (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). To continue the in-depth exploration of the influence of leadership on school culture, as well as to clarify any uncertainties in the responses from the first round of interviews, a second round of interviews was conducted. Like the first interview, the second interview guide (Appendix C) was semi-structured, open-ended and included questions and prompts related to the emergent themes from the primary data analysis (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Once again interviews were held in mutually convenient locations, verbal consent for participation was obtained, and responses were documented using both audio-recording, fieldnotes and memos.
Interview procedures. Correspondence between the researcher and the participants was conducted via email. Once the participants responded to the initial interview request expressing their interest in participating in the research, they were emailed general information regarding the study as well as the letter of information and consent form. Participants were free to select a date and location for their interview at this stage. Six of the interviews took place in public locations (coffee shop, arena lobby) and two at the primary investigator’s workplace.

Each interview lasted between thirty and ninety minutes and included the following components: welcome and exchange of pleasantries, description of the research purpose and explanation of the interview procedure (participation is voluntary, they are permitted to skip questions or stop the interview any time, etc.), presentation of signed consent form or reading and signing of consent form if not already signed, setting up of audio recording equipment, followed by the interview itself. During the interview, the researcher took fieldnotes of the main points being discussed and any additional observations noticed. These fieldnotes were later compared to the transcripts of the interviews and any novel information was added to the transcripts to be analyzed. Upon completion of the interview, the participant was asked whether they had any final questions or comments regarding the topic, then the interview was ended, and the audio recording was stopped.

The interview was later transcribed by the primary researcher then emailed to the participant for revision and approval. Participants could make modifications where they felt it was necessary to accurately convey their experiences and were allowed to request a change of pseudonym if desired. Once approval of the transcript was granted, the exploratory thematic analysis began (Guest et al., 2011). A second interview guide was created based on results of this primary analysis. The same eight participants were once again contacted via email to schedule a
second interview. The process described above was repeated for the second set of interviews. All data, including both sets of transcripts, and the researchers fieldnotes, were then coded and analyzed in greater detail.

Data Analysis Procedures

Prior to performing analysis, the collected data were compiled and organized into a workable format. Recorded interviews were manually transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher into Microsoft Word. To supplement their responses, some participants provided examples of artifacts (i.e.: emails, slogans, apparel, etc.). Descriptions of these artifacts, as well as comments regarding participants’ interpretations of their relevance, were input into the Microsoft Word documents as well. In order to structure and analyze the data systematically, the transcripts were transferred into Microsoft Excel and manually coded line-by-line (Ose, 2016). The first cycle of coding was done using a combination of Descriptive codes – words or phrases that summarize general topics or concepts; and In Vivo codes – words or phrases generated from the participants’ own language (Saldana, 2013; see chart below). This technique involved reading each transcript numerous times and labeling important statements with codes that emerge from context (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2013). Upon completion of the first cycle of coding, the data were reorganized, and participant statements were grouped together using the code list created. These grouped statements were then further analyzed in the second coding cycle using Pattern coding (Ose, 2016; Saldana, 2013). This involved grouping similar codes and significant statements based on their relevance to the experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2013). Next, these codes were merged into fourteen larger groups based on identified links or relationships. These groups were then further consolidated to establish three main
themes, which are believed to represent the true essence of the phenomenon being studied (Saldana, 2013).

Chart 1.1 Emergent categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Positive Behaviours</th>
<th>Negative Behaviours</th>
<th>External Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Principal setting the tone</td>
<td>&quot;Leading by fear&quot;</td>
<td>Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original School Culture</td>
<td>Promoting growth</td>
<td>Secrecy</td>
<td>Factors behind culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extracurriculars</td>
<td>Gentle correction</td>
<td>&quot;Two-faced&quot;</td>
<td>School board</td>
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<tr>
<td>Factors behind culture</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>Unsupportive</td>
<td>&quot;Broad&quot;</td>
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<td>Knowledge of culture</td>
<td>Visibility</td>
<td>Unilateral</td>
<td>Professional development</td>
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<td>Changing roles</td>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>Mismanagement of resources</td>
<td>Teacher leaders</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Involved</td>
<td>Disorganized</td>
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<td>Principal's Motivation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Inappropriate</td>
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<td>Vision</td>
<td>Principal's Strategies</td>
<td>&quot;Not enough&quot;</td>
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<td>Power</td>
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<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Positive Attributes</td>
<td>Negative Attributes</td>
<td>Influence on Culture</td>
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<td>&quot;Ticking boxes&quot;</td>
<td>Likeable</td>
<td>&quot;High strung&quot;</td>
<td>Positive culture</td>
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<td>Honesty</td>
<td>Dishonesty</td>
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<td>&quot;Caring&quot;</td>
<td>Self-promotion</td>
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<td>&quot;Understanding&quot;</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>&quot;No influence&quot;</td>
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<td>Personable</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
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<td>Dedication</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Principal vs. culture</td>
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<td>Knowledgeable</td>
<td>Stern</td>
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<td>Self-promotion</td>
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<td>&quot;Servant&quot;</td>
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<td>In class presence</td>
<td>Positive Attitudes</td>
<td>Negative Attitudes</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
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<td>&quot;Set in their ways&quot;</td>
<td>Parent-teacher interaction</td>
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<td>Negativity</td>
<td>Fellowship</td>
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<td>Skewed recognition</td>
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<td>Principal's Strategies</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
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Chart 1.2 Overall themes

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<th>Theme One: Qualities of Effective Leadership</th>
<th>Theme Two: Qualities of Ineffective Leadership</th>
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<td>Principal's approach to leadership</td>
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<td>Positive leadership behaviours</td>
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<th>Theme Three: External Factors Influencing School Culture</th>
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This essence, which will be described in the findings section of this study, is a combination of both a structural description of the context in which the phenomenon took place, and a “‘textual description’ of the experience—what happened—and include[s] verbatim examples” (Creswell, 2013, p. 193). This form of data analysis has been championed by Moustakas (1994) and is widely regarded as the standard data analysis protocol for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2013).

**Strategies for Validation and Trustworthiness of Findings**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify four criteria which need to be satisfied in order to ensure a qualitative study is sufficiently trustworthy: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Here we will discuss the strategies used to meet these four tenets to guarantee that the findings were as valid and trustworthy as possible.

Credibility is defined as “confidence in the truth of the findings, including an accurate understanding of the context” (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2005, p. 25). The term credibility can be used interchangeably with validity in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2011). The first strategy employed to maximize credibility was choosing a well-established data collection method. As discussed previously, the literature identifies interviews as the best method for the
exploration of a social phenomenon, and semi-structured interviews are considered the most reliable interview method for ensuring honest and in-depth responses from the participants (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Guest et al., 2013; Shenton, 2004). Additionally, conducting multiple interviews with each participant helped establish a trusting relationship and elicit more genuine responses (Creswell, 2013). Using this specific interviewing style in addition to multiple interviews mitigated the risk of bias in participants’ responses and improved the credibility of resultant findings. The second strategy employed to ensure credibility was member-checking; providing the participants with the transcripts of their interviews, as well as the preliminary analyses and interpretations of the data in order to solicit their opinions and confirm the accuracy of the accounts (Creswell, 2013; Shenton, 2004). Any changes or modifications that participants made were recorded and input into the analysis, thereby obtaining the most accurate representation of their experiences (Shenton, 2004). All research methods and analyses were subject to review by both the study supervisor and committee member. A final strategy used to satisfy the credibility criteria was Krefting’s (1991) code-recode procedure. This entails coding the data for analysis, then after a two-week hiatus, repeating the coding process from the original data. Results of the two spaced coding events are compared and the axial coding process is continued keeping only the similarities that emerged from both individual coding sessions. Repeating the coding process on separate occasions two weeks apart improves credibility by limiting bias based on the analyzing researcher’s personal state of mind at the time of coding.

With regards to transferability – the aspect of applicability of findings – comprehensive descriptions of the research process are presented in this text (Amankwaa, 2016; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Thorough explanations of the methodology and justification for these choices are described in depth in this chapter.
Furthermore, findings and resultant conclusions are presented transparently in Chapter 4. This detailed account of the research study allows anyone looking at these results to decide, based on the context, settings, and environment, whether the findings presented within this study are applicable to their own position or situation (Shenton, 2004).

Similarly, dependability is when the researchers’ findings have a strong aspect of consistency (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The detailed descriptions of the research design implemented, as well as the methods used to obtain and analyze the data in order to arrive at the findings, are presented in an effort to address the dependability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). This would allow a future researcher to repeat the study in a manner consistent with the methods outlined here.

Finally, to be trustworthy, a study must have an aspect of neutrality, thereby having confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In this study, special attention was paid to identifying and describing the researcher’s own biases and experiences with the phenomenon in question so as to openly demonstrate how these experiences may influence the analysis and interpretation of the data (Amankwaa, 2016; Shenton, 2004). Decisions made regarding the selection of methods and analysis of findings were detailed within the study in order to ensure transparency.

Ethical Considerations

There were no anticipated ethical issues for this study. All methodologies and methods were approved by the General Research Ethics Board at Queen’s University on November 27th, 2018. Participants were emailed the letter of information and consent form for revision prior to their interview day. Signed consent forms were completed upon arrival at the first interview. Verbal consent was also obtained from each participant prior to starting the interview process for both sets of interviews. The interviews took place at mutually convenient public locations for
both participant and researcher safety. Participants were not obligated to answer any questions and were free to withdraw from the study during or after the interview process with no penalty. The data (interview transcripts, fieldnotes, consent forms, etc.) were securely stored on a password protected computer and password protected OneDrive. The computer is always stored in a locked office. The data will be stored for five years and then securely destroyed. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant to anonymize any identifying information, and the coded list linking real names to pseudonyms was written in a notebook which was stored securely in a locked cabinet, separate from the study data. Participants were informed of their pseudonyms and given the choice to select an alternative name if the original was not suitable. Other than the primary researcher, no one had access to the data. There were no anticipated conflicts of interest with regards to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this study.

**Chapter Summary**

The decisions with respect to study type, data collection and data analysis strategies were all based on well-established qualitative research theories and current literature. A hermeneutical phenomenology was selected as the best form of qualitative research due to the nature of the research questions being explored and the researcher’s personal experiences with the influence of leadership. The social constructivism framework fit naturally with this methodology as this model seeks to determine how individuals’ social experiences shape their realities, just as the research sought to understand the participants’ experiences with leadership’s influence on school culture. Retired teachers participated in two rounds of open-ended, semi-structured individual interviews which explored the phenomenon in depth until responses had reached saturation. Data were subjected to two cycles of manual coding using Microsoft Office software and analyzed to determine themes. Special effort was placed on satisfying Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) four
constructs for trustworthiness in qualitative research to ensure valid findings. The following chapter will discuss the findings that resulted from this research process.
Chapter Four

Research Findings

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the experiences and perceptions of veteran teachers regarding the influence of leadership on school culture at the secondary school level. Based on the data analysis, three main themes emerged: a) effective school leadership; b) ineffective school leadership; and, c) factors mitigating the influence of school leadership on school culture. These themes directly answer the research question: ‘What are the veteran teachers’ perceptions of how their principals’ explicit and implicit leadership practices, behaviors, policies, styles, and strategies impact school culture?’ Each theme is comprised of numerous factors which will be explored in depth.

Effective School Leadership

The first major theme that emerged from the data analysis was veteran teachers’ perceptions of what constitutes effective school leadership. Effective school leadership in this study refer to leadership practices, behaviours, policies, approaches, and strategies which positively impacted school culture and were viewed as beneficial and constructive to the school community (Kythreotis et al., 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Lindahl, 2011; Quin et al., 2015). This theme is broken down into several subcategories which will be detailed below.

Positively perceived motivations. Why an individual decided to become a principal, and what they chose to do while in that position of authority, could either help or hinder a principal’s perceived effectiveness. Several participants described ‘good principals’ as teachers who had served in the system long enough to become masters of the profession, and moved on to principalship as the last stage in their careers because they believed they had acquired the
knowledge and experience to contribute positively to their school community. Oliver, a 35-year veteran teacher, summed this up:

What is the principal’s motivation? If I want to be the best principal I can to serve my school community, because that’s what I believe a principal should do, and that’s basically what I’m going to do until I retire. I think it takes a length of time to develop the skills, the attitudes, the materials, the resources, to become a real effective teacher. The people who have taken that time and then become administrators know along the path of that development what people need. (Oliver)

These veteran-teachers-turned-principals were not ascending to the leadership position for personal gain, but rather wanted to use the role of principalship to increase their scope of influence and help more people than they could have simply as teachers. “Those were the best principals,” mused Oliver, “the ones who never wanted to be principals but just stepped up to help”. This selfless motivation was reflected in how principals conducted themselves when implementing new practices or celebrating school achievements. “It would be best if the principal stepped back from it, they should be the facilitator, not the Hollywood star” (Emma). Again, the principal should be using their influence to help the school achieve great things, not for personal gain or recognition, but rather for the betterment of all within the school community.

‘I’m here to serve’ approach to leadership. A principal’s perceived mindset while in the leadership position, as well as their approach to being a leader played an important role in whether veteran teachers found them to be effective leaders. Many of the participants looked back favorably upon principals who would cater to the needs of the school, and support teachers in ensuring they provide students with the best educational experience possible. This idea is summarized well by Oliver: “He had a real ‘I’m here to serve’ kind of attitude as opposed to I’m
here to control.” This servant leadership was exemplified by one of Oliver’s principals through the ways in which they were more than willing to roll their sleeves up and work alongside the custodial staff: “you go down to the cafeteria and you see your principal in there helping set up chairs for the assembly, that sends a message” (Oliver). When not physically aiding their staff, principals could still have a positive impact by being supportive and providing teachers with the resources and freedom to teach as they wished. When the staff felt that their principal was there to help them and facilitate their jobs rather than micromanage or direct them, they felt more at ease and were more likely to devote more time and effort into their teaching. “You need to be given the freedom to explore, to try new things, time and resources and support need to be there” (Gabriel). Several of the participants stated that when they knew they had the full support of their principal they were more willing to take risks by trying new educational approaches, and to think outside the box on how to best present their material. The reason behind risk-taking was described by Emma; “sometimes in teaching you have to do that, you have to step outside and say ‘what is a way that maybe hasn’t been thought about that I can help these students because they all [have] different needs, expectations and backgrounds.’” Here the principal’s approach to their role has a direct and tangible impact on the overall educational experience by “empowering staff and enabling staff to help the students” (Oliver).

**Positive leadership strategies.** In addition to being perceived to be selflessly motivated and employing a supportive approach to their role as a leader, principals need to employ the right strategies to be effective in the eyes of their teacher colleagues. All participants spoke highly of the principals who: had a vision for their school’s future; established policies and set clear expectations to achieve that vision; were present and visible both in the halls and in the classrooms; and strove to put their schools’ needs first.
“Having a vision for the school and a plan as to how to achieve that vision” set a principal apart (Emma). Too often, principals would come to a new school with ideas of what should be changed, but no formal strategy on how to achieve those goals. “Al was an excellent motivator, when we had a staff meeting it wasn’t just about what we’re [going to] do next week or here’s a new program, he would actually set up some routines” (Kayden). When the staff felt as though the principal was “being clear with the expectations and goals and [had] an actual map of how we can achieve them without overwhelming people”, there was immediately more buy-in (Emma). Kayden, a 31-year science and special education teacher, remembered one principal who made sure that there was physical proof of the direction in which they wanted to take the school:

   Give everybody a hat that has SD on it and talk about pride, talk about showing the kids that you’re positive. He had hats made for all the teachers, and I can’t remember the slogan on them, but it was a very positive thing – “education for all” – or something like that. Thursday is going to be a school appreciation day sort of thing. (Kayden)

Here we see how the principal promoted the positive vision they had for their school through numerous means. They made their vision visible through mottos on hats for teachers to wear to school functions, and even created weekly events to help reinforce their message consistently.

Visibility was a leadership strategy that was repeatedly mentioned by all participants as critical to a principal who inspired positive change. Simply stated, “principals who were in the school a lot were positive for the school” (Oliver). “If the principal was supportive of staff, seen in the public eye with students, interact[ing] with staff and students, it create[d] a positive culture” (Gabriel). A good leader was viewed by the participants as someone who was present
within the school, making connections with their staff and getting to know the students as well. Ned Law mentioned how in his eyes, “the strongest ones, they know the kids”, taking the time to really integrate themselves into the fabric of the school community rather than simply leading from their office through policy and memos. Even when other duties pulled the principal away from the school, Ned Law, a 26-year veteran teacher, remembered how one particular principal managed to still make their presence felt:

I’d say [he was] always [in] by 6:00 and that was part of his game plan – being out and meeting and greeting the kids. [He] knew all the kids’ names, knew everything else and he said: ‘You know how it works? You’re there right then and they think you’re there all day’, but by 8:35 he’d be a lot of times on his way to the board office, but the assumption was there. (Ned Law)

Through this strategy, Ned Law’s principal still made the school community feel valued through their leader’s perceived presence. Many participants took the concept of visibility further, mentioning how they enjoyed having the principal stop into their classrooms and show an interest in their teaching. Adam looked back on his principal frequenting his classroom favorably; “I appreciated that, I never found it as an intrusion, I never found it as ‘oh he’s spying on me’ or anything like that”. Some teachers even lamented that they felt as though the principal didn’t come through their classrooms often enough and wishing they “played a more active role sometimes, coming into the teachers’ classrooms, rather than being in their office all the time” (Michael).

The third strategy veteran teachers viewed as crucial to being an effective principal was putting their school and the school community first. This often meant advocating for necessary resources and supplies from the school board, and not allowing the school board to dictate how
their school was run. “Teachers advocate to the principals for the kids, principals advocate to the board for the school, that’s the way it’s supposed to work” (Oliver). Oliver went on to outline how in his mind “the principal’s commitment should be to the community”, because it is impossible for the school board to tailor their policies to each individual school, which is why an effective principal needs to be the one to go “to the board office and say this is what I need for my school.” Further elaborating on this idea, Emma discussed how the most effective principals “were the ones who were able to buffer, act as a shield and say ‘ok, everybody knows the expectations are far too broad, it’s not reasonable, here’s what is reasonable, here’s what we’re [going to] work on together’”. This idea of acting as a buffer for the school board’s demands was echoed by most other participants and efficiently blended many of the strategies outlined above. To fill this role a principal had to have a clear vision of what they wanted to implement at their school, a plan for how to achieve that goal, advocate for it to their senior administration, and be an active presence in the school to enact it.

**Positive leadership behaviours.** When asked about the importance of positive behaviours in a principal, Adam thought a principal “should be a figurehead that everybody looks at and says, ‘that’s a good school to go to, I’d love to go to that school because I heard he’s a good role model’”. Throughout the interview process, participants identified several key behaviours a principal should display in order to effect positive change in their schools. These behaviours included: personally modeling the ways in which they expect the staff and students to act, providing support whenever needed, correcting any mistakes through constructive and private criticism, and working together with the staff towards a shared goal.

Principals modeling the behaviours and attitudes that they expect from staff and students was seen as an effective way to influence how everyone else in the school behaved. Emma
reflected on a very positive experience with a leader who sent a very clear message through their actions: “it wasn’t a command, it wasn’t an instruction, it was ‘I’m going to behave in this way, I’d like you all to join me and behave in this way as well’”. This method of overtly displaying the actions, manners and attitudes that they wished to see from their staff was met with a more positive response and a smoother transition to meet those expectations than had the principal simply outlined their goals with no modeling on their part. This concept was reiterated by Ned Law in his own experiences with leadership; “I think he set the tone that we needed to think of the kids first, that was always important.” Providing a consistent and tangible example of exactly what they expected of others was seen as the best method a principal could use to influence the staff and students’ behaviours and attitudes.

Beyond simply modeling the vision they had for their school, principals were also viewed as effective when they were ready and willing to provide their staff with all necessary support. This support could take the form of physical resources to aid in classroom teaching, as well as reinforcement when dealing with any issues that arose. Adam reflected positively on a particular principal who was always willing to help his technology classes run smoothly: “support was really important, if you needed something in your classroom, he would get it to you.” Ned Law placed more value on the advocacy side of supportive behaviours: “I always want somebody that’s got my back, and I have to feel that it’s there.” Michael, a 31 year veteran science and math teacher, furthered this notion by discussing a principal’s role in parent-teacher interactions:

The best principals were the ones who supported the teachers if the parents heard different stories from their kids and blamed the teacher. Sometimes there are teachers who aren’t the greatest at their job – there’s no doubt, that’s how it is in any job – but
90% of the time the teacher is right in my opinion and the student is just not willing to do anything. (Michael)

All participants agreed that having a supportive principal, not just emotionally, but in their actions (especially when it came to dealing with parents), was among the most important traits a principal could have. As mentioned in the section regarding a principal’s approach, these feelings of support immediately translated into more confidence and creativity in terms of lessons and an overall improvement in the student experience. Having a leader who showed an understanding and appreciation for how difficult the teaching profession could be helped to alleviate some of the stress, especially when the leader was asking their staff to take on new or additional responsibilities:

Always acknowledging that I understand how hard you work, I understand there are challenges, let’s just focus on this for now, and that’s manageable. Ok this administrator understands the effort we’re putting in and we’re going to tackle one thing at a time.

(Emma)

This understanding of the challenges facing the staff of a school comes not only from a well-developed sense of empathy, but also from the administrator having put in the work to make themselves aware of the history and context of their school. Principals who showed themselves to be knowledgeable in everything pertaining to their sphere of influence (subject matter, responsibilities, unique challenges, and background of their school, etc.) were held in the highest esteem.

When role-modeling and supportiveness were not enough and expectations weren’t being met, a good principal needed to know when to take “proper disciplinary action as well. It doesn’t mean you let everyone get away with everything just because they’re struggling” (Emma).
Participants were quick to point out that issues naturally arise within a school and that having a principal who only focused on the positives could be detrimental. Therefore, the methods by which principals went about addressing issues within their schools could also positively impact their perceived effectiveness. “You need to go after where the problems are, quietly and in a supportive manner” states Emma, noting that discretion in the discipline is a key factor in its effectiveness. “If there were issues, I don’t even think you would know about it because it would be dealt with quietly in his office” (Emma). Adam detailed his experiences in a similar light, mentioning the best principals in his mind were always “fair” but “didn’t mind correcting you” if they saw any issues with the staff, but always in a private and constructive manner.

A final behaviour which participants deemed important in an effective principal was their willingness to work together with their staff and involve everyone in the decision-making process. Adopting a team mentality rather than a top-down approach made the teachers feel respected and empowered, thereby creating a more cohesive culture in the school. Emma, a 20 year veteran French Immersion teacher, detailed one principal’s comprehensive approach to this behaviour:

One particular principal who I found to be very effective, when there was an issue – whether it be uniform, whether it be changes coming in with regards to any type of process – this principal would actually go and speak individually to teachers first before raising it in front of the group. So he would already have an understanding before raising it let’s say at a staff meeting, so that first of all it was not a surprise when it was introduced, it allowed people to already have conversations about it prior to addressing it in a group setting, so that in that way you could avoid that ‘I’m dropping the bomb on you’ reactive or emotional response. And because people had been spoken to originally,
they already felt involved in the process, so it wasn’t a question of ‘here I am before you, imposing something’ it was ‘remember when we talked about when I discussed with you individually about blank, well let’s talk about it now together!’ (Emma)

Involving each teacher at a personal and individual level in the problem-solving and decision-making that needed to occur at a school enabled the staff to feel as though their opinions were being valued and respected, and avoided the pushback and conflict that arises from a unilateral decision being unexpectedly implemented. In cases where an issue had to be dealt with faster and all stakeholders could not be consulted individually, Gabriel spoke of a way the principal could still seek teacher involvement: “if there were issues that were rising in the school, they would consult department heads, get feedback, collectively as a leadership team, then decisions were made accordingly”. In either case, participants praised being involved in major decisions and spoke highly of the principals who took the time to consult the staff whenever possible.

**Positive personal attributes.** Though behaviours and strategies were often mentioned by participants when discussing the qualities of an effective leader, a principal’s personal attributes received most of the attention. General likeability, honesty, integrity, as well as an ability to be empathetic, personable, genuine, and assertive were among the traits which garnered the most attention. Carly spoke highly of her experiences with effective principals: “they just made you feel so welcomed, and they cared about you, if you were having a rough time with something, they took you in and talked to you about it.” The participants all spoke more favorably of a principal who was “not just a task person” but rather “to be an effective administrator you have to be a people person” (Gabriel). The principal had to have a high emotional intelligence to be
able to connect with their staff and understand the turmoil and stresses associated with the day-to-day life of teaching.

Adding to a principal’s understanding nature was their ability to reason and adjust their mindset in light of new evidence and “accept criticism when it comes up” (Carly). Oliver discussed how “if you could give a good rational educational reason” to a good principal for why you thought there was a better solution than the one they proposed “you could actually get them to change their mind, as opposed to this is what I want because I’m the principal.” Carly further emphasized this point, detailing how one particularly good leader in her eyes wasn’t “the warmest and fuzziest guy, but you knew where he was coming from. He was quite by the book, by the rules, but if he had to bend them, he would.” This concept of rationality coupled with consistency was very important for many participants because it allowed them to know what to expect from their principal in any given scenario, while at the same time feeling as though they would be shown some flexibility if a unique situation presented itself and merited a modification to the status quo.

**Building relationships.** A principal’s ability to establish and nurture positive relationships with all members of their school community was paramount to their perceived effectiveness as a leader. A principal who could develop a sense of comradery with their staff through their personal and professional interactions was seen as a key contributor to the positive culture of a school. Michael stated:

I think the number one way that a principal or vice principal can lead is by – even though they’re not a part of the teachers’ union – going to the staff function, going out and watching the extra curriculars, showing an interest in things other than administrivia.
Even joining a hockey pool or something like that, which we’ve had some admin do, it makes a comradery. (Michael)

When principals showed that they cared about their staff and were willing to interact with them beyond the call of duty, it nurtured a sense of fellowship within the school. Participants spoke fondly of principals who they could view not only as colleagues, but as friends outside of the professional setting. “He would do things with us, he would come out for drinks with us on Friday night. He knew he was your principal, but he was also your friend at the same time” (Carly). Some of this comradery derived from the principals’ sense of humour as well: “you could make fun of them and they could roll with it, you could tease them and they would roll with it, and they could tease you right back” (Carly). This lightheartedness helped ease the tension and stress that usually comes with any professional setting, and made it easier to focus on the tasks at hand without worrying about additional negative pressures being applied from the leader.

This sense of fellowship between principals and staff had another distinct advantage according to participants – it increased the principal’s knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of each teacher, and allowed them to assign classes more appropriately. Kayden reflected on his experiences with personable leaders: “I think a principal has to have the ability to know who belongs where, and mentor/encourage them to improve themselves”. When a principal was aware of the personal and professional characteristics of their staff, they could manipulate course schedules and play to the strengths of as many players as possible, which resulted in a happier staff and better outcomes for the students.

Positive relationships with principals also led to participants feeling comfortable and supported, which in turn motivated them to go the extra mile in both their teaching and
extracurriculars. Gabriel spoke of how “principals who influenced the school in a positive sense, they’d integrate with the staff, they’d want to know how you were doing on a daily basis, treating you more as a person.” Participants discussed how this sense of comfort and support enabled them to take initiative and be more creative in their teaching styles and lesson planning, while also allowing them to develop professionally.

Participants were quick to point out that the most effective principals did not exclusively build strong relationships with teachers, but also took the time to nurture connections with the students and school community. Adam mentioned a principal who “took an interest” by coming to observe classes “and seeing how kids reacted with the teacher. He came in because he enjoyed it and he wanted to see how the kids enjoyed it”. The principal’s presence within the classroom was a welcome addition because it empowered the teacher in the eyes of the students to see the school’s leader taking an interest in their subject as well. Beyond the classroom setting, Carly reflected on how a personable leader could change the dynamics of the school: “the kids felt comfortable talking to [the principal], even if they were in trouble. They didn’t mind going down and talking to him, even if they were having a rough time on their own”. The principal-student relationship was beneficial as it allowed students to see the principal as a resource they could go to for help, and someone that they could approach for help. Participants believed that this led to more joint problem-solving of any issues in the school, and less rule-breaking:

Relationship building was also critical beyond the walls of the school, as Ned Law described:

You need to know the community, the families all knew each other, so I think to be a strong administrator, you couldn’t be an outsider, and that meant you had to show the
work ethic. You can’t be the first one out the door, you need to be the first one at the school, and perhaps the last to leave. (Ned Law)

This visible dedication to the larger school community was so important because it showed the principal was tailoring their approach to that specific population, had an appreciation of the unique challenges facing them, and was committed to working alongside them to collectively improve. The community’s unwillingness to accept ‘an outsider’ as the leader of their school stemmed from a fear that this incoming principal would adopt a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach that was not suited to the needs of their children. By being a visible and devoted presence in the school and showing a willingness to work alongside all members of the school community, a principal could overcome this aversion.

Overall, Emma summed up the relational aspect of a principal’s leadership as follows: “I really do believe there are simply individuals who have the emotional intelligence to understand how to relate to others, and that determines a great portion of the school culture at that time while that administrator is present”. This emotional intelligence would allow a principal to connect and empathize with all members of their school community and use this understanding to adjust their vision for the school to best suit the needs of all. This emotional intelligence stemmed from the ability to truly listen to the concerns of their school, and adopt policies that were viewed as ‘fair’ by the majority of the stakeholders, even when not necessarily equal. Oliver reflected on one such instance, when on-call assignments were not being given to teachers who were involved in extracurriculars. The principal explained how he felt the coaches were already contributing enough and deserved a respite. Though the two tasks were not equal, the division of labour was viewed as fair by most, and the needs of the school were being met.
**Resulting positive shifts in school culture.** When a school culture changed for the better – when teachers felt comfortable and supported at work, and there was a general sense of unity and school spirit – participants spoke of how many staff members would respond by giving more of themselves to the school community. Carly recalled such experiences fondly:

All the teachers would do above and beyond. Like we only had such a small staff and yet everyone would take on two or three extracurriculars, no questions asked. It’s fun! The staff room was therapeutic; at lunch you could laugh. (Carly)

This willingness of the staff to volunteer their time to help around the school and do more than their contractual requirements translated into tangible impacts for the student body:

You walk into the school and you can feel the general energy in the student body, and what I can tell you is that the students were interested in participating in the extracurricular activities. They were interested in starting new groups, there was a school spirit, so they would actually want to attend the spirit rallies and not take off and go somewhere else because there was engagement, there was buy-in, that this was a good thing that we had going. (Emma)

A positive shift in school culture caused more engagement in all school activities and nurtured a sense of belonging and pride in the students. This lowered the incidents of rule breaking and behavioural issues became less common because students felt as though they were part of something greater than themselves and were willing to work to maintain that community.

Having a positive school culture did not mean that things would run perfectly, but participants were quick to note that this situation was where a principal could have the greatest impact. The presence of a positive culture allowed everyone in the school to perform their designated role to the best of their ability. When staff knew they could rely on the leader to meet
any challenges that arose and have them addressed properly and efficiently, they could then focus their attention on delivering their programs and curriculum in a way that was best for their students, and the students reaped the benefits.

In certain cases, participants noted how a principal could go beyond a secondary role in shaping the culture of a school and be the champion of positive change. Kayden described one principal:

[they were] sincerely interested in those kids having different experiences that would motivate them to be successful. The kids showed a lot of pride. Trying out for a team, usually at SD, you’re just on the team. But these kids are starting to walk around with their jerseys in the school. (Kayden)

Seeing a principal show commitment, and genuine interest in the school, resonated with the students and galvanized their pride in belonging to that community.

Overall, participants perceived principals as effective leaders when the principals were authentic in their practices and led by example. These principals were selflessly devoted to the wellbeing and success of their entire school community and would demonstrate this through the shaping of a supportive and collaborative school culture. The most effective leaders avoided paternalistic, top-down approaches to leadership, choosing instead to work alongside their staff in matters of problem-solving and decision-making. Additionally, these principals displayed strong and positive personal attributes such as honesty and approachability, which enabled them to establish and nurture a sense of comradery within their schools. This positive relationship-building, coupled with the respect and empowerment that staff gained through the principal’s practices, permeated through the entire school culture, and resulted in a better educational experience for all involved.
Ineffective School Leadership

Conversely, the second theme that emerged from participant responses is: leadership qualities which veteran teachers regarded as detrimental or negative to the overall school culture. The subcategories within this theme that will be explored in detail include the ladder climbers, control-based and negative approaches to leadership, poor leadership strategies, negative behaviours and personal attributes, and broken relationships.

The ladder climbers. Here, the reasons behind why a principal decided to pursue their post, and what they chose to do while in this position of power revolved around self-promotion and career advancement, rather than improving their schools and serving others:

They’re the ladder climbers and we’re one of the bottom rungs. The principal who sees it as just a steppingstone to being a superintendent or director, padding the resume, if it is the last item on the resume then it’s different than if it’s the first item on the resume. The one principal was a ladder climber, and we were the bottom rung so we got stepped on the hardest. (Oliver)

When the principal’s goal was personal career advancement, participants felt as though their leader did not care what happened within their school, as long as their image was being promoted. Their involvement in anything school-related became a public spectacle centered around the appearance of success and productivity. Programs and changes were initiated because they were fashionable or looked impressive on a resume, but there was no effort to follow through on the task and affect lasting change. As such, all the principal’s actions were perceived as being inauthentic and empty, which led to a similarly hollow school culture. Worse, as Ned Law recalled, these aspirations would occasionally lead to principals taking advantage of their staff for their own benefit:
Ewan was a real political player, loved to be in the board office, for him he needed to have a pissing contest and he always needed to be the first guy to have done whatever the principals needed to do, sometimes at the expense of others. (Ned Law)

This principal’s drive to appear better than his peers would lead to him delegating an unreasonable amount of additional responsibilities to his staff. This took away from time that staff would usually spend in roles which would positively benefit the school community. The pressure to maintain the principal’s illusion of success restricted the teachers’ freedom to pursue their own goals and develop their own professional careers. Subsequently, there was a lot of underlying resentment and a loss of motivation. This low morale amongst teachers was eventually felt by the students as well.

**Control-based approach to leadership.** Ineffective leaders were frequently associated with negative and individualistic mindsets. Many participants reflected unfavorably upon principals whose approach to leadership centered on control. Emma recalled one principal who was determined to micromanage every activity that occurred within the school and “be the guardian of all information and all processes.” This approach ultimately failed because “the breadth of the role and the responsibilities involved are too great to allow that to actually be effective. That works if you have one or two people under you. If you’re responsible for hundreds, you cannot micromanage” (Emma). This criticism was echoed by numerous participants who felt the principal should be focused more on establishing the overall goals and direction of the school, while trusting their teachers to actualize those expectations.

Micromanagement of school staff by principals often had the opposite effect than desired as the school became disorganized and lacked proper direction and cohesion in the execution of plans.
Another control-based approach to leadership that was deemed ineffective included principals who were rigid and dismissive of advice or criticism. Gabriel remembered one principal who came into the first meeting of the department heads at a new school and announced, “this is the way I’m going to run this ship, if you don’t like it, leave”. This rigid, paternalistic approach was inefficient because it stripped power away from the teachers and left some of the most involved and dedicated staff in the school feeling disrespected and underappreciated. Unilateral decision making also led to staff resistance against changes the principal wanted to implement. Often, the teachers had worked at the school longer than the incoming principal and believed they knew the needs of the community better than the new totalitarian leader.

Certain leaders were insecure in their authority and made up for that apprehension by associating themselves with more successful people:

Another less effective leader would have derived his sense of strength and power from connections. The first time I walked into this leader’s office, what I noticed was that every display on the wall was an image of this person either next to, or engaged with, someone who people should consider to be powerful, significant, important, and therefore we’re supposed to consider that person to be important. (Emma)

This strategy of a leader showcasing their connections in order to validate their own authority was undermined by the fact that none of the success or achievements they displayed were their own. They needed to hide their insecurity and lack of personal success behind their association with others. As such, this insecurity and lack of confidence in their own abilities would eventually manifest itself in the principal’s actions. These leaders were prone to making unilateral decisions regarding the direction of their schools as they were incapable of allowing
themselves to appear vulnerable by asking for input from their staff.

**Poor leadership strategies.** Specific strategies employed by principals could also impact school culture in a negative way. Unclear policies/expectations, skewed recognition of staff, lack of visibility and altered priorities were among the factors that contributed to this inefficiency.

Participants often found one of the most detrimental strategies was actually the lack of a strategy at all when implementing policies. A lack of clarity when communicating expectations and poor follow-through on implemented policies was very frustrating for staff who were keen to effect change in the school. As Michael aptly stated: “what’s the sense in having the policy if you’re not going by it?” This applied to policies regarding school uniforms, eating in class, cellphone use and a range of other topics. In each case, an administrator set a new rule for the school, but either did not define the consequences for breaking the rule, or simply did not enforce the rule when violations were brought to their attention. This type of obscurity led to divisions within the school and eventually rising hostility between the teachers actively enforcing the rules and those who chose to disregard them.

The use of favoritism and skewed recognition of staff members based on the principal’s personal motives or feelings towards them in order to achieve their goals was also frowned upon by participants. Emma discussed one such principal who implemented a tradition which initially seemed positive, but had a more self-serving ulterior motive. “In the last administrator’s regime there were the recognizing individuals [each week], but what people began to see very quickly in those announcements, was whoever was involved in one of their projects would be recognized”. These projects that received recognition were usually the type which would garner the most acclaim for the school and by extension the principal, and as such were being encouraged for the purpose of self-promotion. The principal made a point of publicly praising the work of teachers
involved in these projects at the exclusion of contributions that the rest of the staff were making in any other area. This misleading method of rewarding staff only if they were involved in projects that forwarded the principal’s personal career and not the school in general ultimately led to divisiveness between the staff supporting the principal and the staff promoting the betterment of the school community.

The final two issues that participants mentioned with respect to ineffective leadership strategies were: a principal’s devotion to the school board over their school, and their absence from the public eye. As described by Carly, these two issues were strongly associated with one another because “when [principals are] spending too much time at the board office, I think that has a big impact, they almost become a shadow figure” (Carly). Participants noted that as their principal attempted to build up their reputation with the school board to win an eventual promotion, they would spend more and more time at the board office, and disappear from the school setting. The principal’s absence impacted both teachers and students at the school, as it rendered any relationship between these parties and the administration nearly impossible. This lack of physical presence in the school community eventually eroded the school culture as well. As noted by Gabriel: “if the principal is seldom in the school or does not take the time to get to know the staff as individuals, then the culture is not as positive” (Gabriel).

**Negative leadership behaviours.** Participants identified multiple behaviours that they believe leaders should avoid if they are trying to effect positive change in their schools. Amongst the worst of these behaviours were leading through fear, being two-faced or inappropriate, and being unsupportive of their staff.

Principals who led through fear were usually unapproachable and quick to pass judgement on others. Kayden recalled a former principal who would regularly publicly
reprimand staff to reinforce himself as the leader and authority. This behaviour started a cycle where the fear of reprisal meant that no one was willing to voice complaints against the principal’s actions, and further contributed to a culture of fear. Similarly, Carly worked with a principal who enjoyed “mak[ing] them fear you, mak[ing] the kids fear you, mak[ing] the teachers fear you.” Carly theorized that the logic behind such actions was that fear would lead to more respect for the rules and therefore create more order in the school. In reality, fear-based leadership caused a decline in the enrollment of students at that school due to the principal’s reputation.

Duplicity in a principal was also seen as very detrimental to the overall culture of a school. In some cases, Oliver mentioned how these principals would manipulate any situation to their advantage: “when it all blows up in our face he’s going to blame you, but if it all goes well he’ll take the credit”. The principal would show no loyalty to their staff or take ownership for any negative consequences of their actions, instead they focused solely on self-promotion whenever possible. Emma described another example of this:

What information you would perceive would not be consistent with the actions that would follow. I’m going to put myself out there as if I’m supportive then I’m going to take what influence I have and manipulate it so that I’m politically protected and then I’m going to determine how that’s going to be regardless of what you want. (Emma)

This principal would carefully shape any situation or policy so as to give the illusion of being supportive and positive if things were to turn out well, while also assuring that they avoided any and all adverse repercussions if there were any issues. This led to teachers feeling betrayed, skeptical, and reluctant to be recruited by the principal for future projects and activities. Additionally, this lack of support for tasks that were not initiated by the principal or
did not directly boost the principal’s reputation caused teachers to lose their enthusiasm for work. Adam mused: “I think it becomes drudgery to come into work when you’re not feeling support or being helped, and the equipment falls apart and there’s nobody there to fix it”. This decline in teacher job satisfaction and motivation in turn impacted the school culture as general morale amongst staff and students became low.

A final way in which leaders’ behaviours were perceived to negatively impact their school was through breaching the trust of their staff. Participants listed many causes of broken trust such as consistent dishonesty and misappropriating school funds, but two cases stood out from the rest. Carly detailed the first, in which her principal was obsessed with evaluating his teachers, attempting to find faults through any possible means. “One day I found him hiding in my supply closet, listening to my teaching”. Shockingly, the principal did not face any disciplinary measures for this action at the time, but consequences were felt in the school culture nonetheless. Not only was this behaviour inappropriate and in violation of educational policy, but it also completely broke down any potential for a positive relationship between the principal and his staff. This act had teachers feeling as though the principal was trying to sabotage their careers, thus any interactions between the groups were undermined by suspicion and hostility.

The second example of a principal abusing their power resulting in a loss of trust was described by Emma: “an administrator was accused of inappropriate sexual behaviour with multiple staff members, and what that does for a female is make you quite hesitant to have any type of one on one conversation because you know you’re at risk”. This case goes far beyond impropriety and into illegality, but the effects within the school were felt well before any legal consequences manifested. These acts caused the school to become an uncomfortable and unsafe environment, particularly for the females on staff. Such an abuse of authority by the principal
was incredibly damaging as many teachers no longer felt safe in the workplace, and it took advantage of individuals who would have difficulty reporting these events for a multitude of reasons including shame, victim-blaming, dismissal of their accounts, and potential damage to their careers and reputations. The effects of this behaviour persisted well after the principal had been removed from the school, been charged, and lost his job.

**Negative personal attributes.** Although participants focused much more on the personal attributes that they found favourable in school leaders, lack of integrity and selfishness were regularly mentioned as being undesirable and harmful to the school culture. Interestingly, though infrequently discussed, participants felt very strongly that if a principal demonstrated these negative attributes it was rather egregious. If a principal acted in a way that portended a lack of integrity, participants felt it was virtually impossible to rebuild those broken bonds. “And it only takes that to happen once not necessarily to you personally, but to someone on staff, and all of a sudden the trust is gone” (Gabriel). Word of deceit or injustice by the principal spread quickly through the school, and a single act could cause a shift in the perception of that leader and their ability to effect positive change. This view was mirrored with respect to selfishness. Principals who were perceived to put themselves first above others, were quickly cast in a negative light and lost the support and trust of their staff.

**Broken relationships.** As a principal’s ability to forge strong relationships contributed to their perceived effectiveness, it follows that broken or damaged relationships would result in a leader being identified as inept. This idea was summarized by Gabriel: “if the principal does not have a positive connection with the staff and with the students, but more so with the staff, then their ability to effect change is severely diminished”. Participants thought that this inability to
connect with their colleagues was caused by a variety of factors, from a lack of empathy and support, to power imbalances, or even a lack of in-person interactions.

Participants referenced feeling unsupported and betrayed in cases where concern for public image or fear of conflict would cause the principal to choose parents over teachers:

They sometimes don’t handle discipline issues the way they should, they throw it back on the teacher, or they’ll side with the parent even though they know the teacher is right and the parent is wrong, but politically for themselves it looks better to side with the parent.

(Oliver)

As mentioned previously, this lack of support led to feelings of frustration and caused a breakdown in the relationships between principals and teachers. Participants felt less comfortable approaching the principal on matters of discipline and would instead attempt to deal with things individually. This resulted in less school wide cooperation, and a less cohesive and united school culture.

A second issue inhibiting the formation of collaborative relationships between principals and staff was principals flaunting and imposing their authority in day to day interactions. “You can’t have dictators in the principal and the VP role” (Michael). A leader who emphasized the imbalance of power and wielded their authority to force school staff to accomplish their self-serving goals prevented any possibility of forging positive, reciprocal relationships. These types of actions disempowered school staff and cast the leader in an unsociable light. Consequently, the principal would then be excluded from any social staff functions, which in turn, further diminished opportunities for positive relationships to form between teachers and principals.

A final factor that negatively impacted the relationship between staff and principals was an absence of interactions between the two groups. “If the principal is seldom in the school or
does not take the time to get to know the staff as individuals, then the culture is not as positive” (Gabriel). A principal who did not actively seek out opportunities to interact with their staff – either due to commitments outside of the school, or because they spend most of their time in their office instead of being present in the halls and classrooms – never truly got to know their staff. This meant the principal had no knowledge of each teachers’ strengths and weaknesses, which would often lead to individuals being placed in teaching assignments outside of their comfort zone. Oliver reflected on how this unnecessarily led to inappropriate work assignments with “a lot of unhappy staff members because we have a lot of people in the wrong position”. Teaching unfamiliar subjects not only increased the stress levels of the teachers, but also diminished the quality of education received by the students. Despite their best efforts, teachers were often unable to deliver the material as effectively as someone who was previously acquainted with it. All levels of the school culture were caused to suffer by their leader’s lack of understanding of their staff members’ strengths and weaknesses.

**Resulting negative shifts in school culture.** Consequently, participants contended that a shift in school culture could lead to many adverse effects. While students reaped the benefits of positive changes in school culture, the repercussions of negative shifts in culture were also primarily borne by the students. The effects of a negative culture shift were usually felt in activities beyond the classroom before they filtered into the classroom itself. Participants noted that extracurriculars were often the first activities to suffer, as they are not contractually mandated activities and require voluntary teacher involvement. “When there is that general lack of spirit, that teachers are less willing to become involved, and in that way it starts to impact the students” (Emma). An unfavourable school culture resulted in teachers losing passion for their work and being less willing to dedicate time beyond what is necessary to the school. This took
away from the student experience because the school could no longer offer many sports and clubs. Accordingly, school spirit began to erode, and even the few extracurriculars which were still being offered began to experience a decline in participation. Though often a multi-factorial issue, in some instances the principal played a noticeable role in the lack of school spirit. As Kayden recounted. “It suddenly became tough to get students to come out for sports because it wasn’t the same sort of pride coming down from the principal” (Kayden). The absence of interest and support from the principal diminished negatively impacted the school culture, which subsequently decreased the motivation of the student body and led to less interest and pride in school activities from students.

Though extracurricular activities were the first to be impacted by a negative shift in school culture, the classroom environment was not impervious to the detrimental effects of an undesirable school culture:

Sometimes in teaching you have to do that, you have to step outside and say ‘what is a way that maybe hasn’t been thought about that I can help these students, because they all [have] different needs, expectations and backgrounds,’ but if you know that there’s no chance of you being supported in that, why would you try? To me that is very sad, and that has a tremendous impact on the students. (Emma)

Participants felt that differentiating the delivery of curriculum to meet the diverse needs of a classroom full of unique students was an incredibly important element of quality education. This process, however, was noted to be extremely time-consuming and occasionally required creative solutions, which fell outside the expected or ‘mandated’ teaching standards. When the culture of the school took a negative toll on the motivation and mindset of the staff, teachers
were far less inclined to dedicate the time, effort, and potential risk necessary to enact such strategies.

In summation, participants perceived principals to be ineffective leaders when the principals’ practices were seen as self-serving and inauthentic. These principals’ focus on self-promotion led to them neglecting elements of their school community which they deemed unimportant, and eventually resulted in a hollow and negative school culture. When implementing new policies or practices, the ineffective principals’ expectations were poorly communicated and unclear, giving rise to confusion and disarray. These principals’ tendencies towards control-based and individualistic leadership would often result in unsupportive, micromanaging, and rigid practices. All these factors combined to produce an environment in which positive and reciprocal relationships between principals and staff were rare, if not impossible to foster, and any overt influence the principal tried to exude on their schools’ culture was immediately met with challenges and resistance.

Factors Mitigating the Influence of School Leadership on School Culture

Throughout the interview process, participants identified many factors which play a role in shaping school culture. A large proportion of these factors fall outside of the principal’s realm of influence. The third theme within the findings was the context and external influences which, in the participants’ opinions, played a vital role in shaping the culture of their schools and limited, or modified, the influence a principal could exert.

School context. The factors at play within a school such as its history and traditions, as well as the demographics of both its students and staff play a major role in the creation and shaping of that school’s culture. Emma reflected on her own experiences and described the contextual factors:
I believe that every school actually has its own culture. Whether the factors that are the primary influence could be the history of the school, the location of the school, and because of the location its certain demographics, students and teachers of various cultural backgrounds, there are many, many factors that influence the culture of the school itself outside of the administration. (Emma)

Other participants echoed these sentiments and listed variables such as access to adequate funding, composition of the staff, and characteristics of the students/school community, which differed from school to school, but that a principal could not change or control. Depending on the school and how these factors combined, these factors often made the foundation of the school’s culture and rendered any attempts at modification futile.

Throughout the interview process, it became clear that all participants viewed teachers as the gatekeepers to school culture. “Well if you’re trying to change the school culture, you’re going to have to focus on the teachers, they’re up front” (Kayden). At the secondary school level especially, the principal is further removed from direct interactions with students than they would be at the elementary level, therefore it is the teachers who have the most influence on the students. The participants were divided on the impact a principal had on the teachers in this sense. Some participants felt that “if school spirit is there, it doesn’t matter if the principal isn’t the greatest. The school spirit will make it so that [teachers] are surrounded by many people who are positive rather than one person” (Michael). These participants believed that teachers influenced one another and created the school culture, and this culture was then passed on to the students independent of the principal. Gabriel described his mindset when interacting with students in the classroom: “how I teach, how I go about teaching, there was never any directive saying you shall do differently” (Gabriel). Given the freedom and independence to act as they
pleased as long as they were properly delivering the curriculum, participants thought “it didn’t matter who was in charge, you’d say ‘oh we’ll get through this one just like we got through the last one’” (Ned Law). This group of participants stipulated that it was the collective energy and outlook of the teachers, coupled with the influence of contextual and external factors, that created and maintained the culture of their schools.

The other participants postulated that “a leader influences the staff; they also influence the students that way” (Oliver). The principal’s influence may have been mediated by the teachers, but that influence will still trickle down to the students and will impact school culture from the top down. Michael described the process as follows:

You have to enjoy your job to be an effective teacher, and that comes from the top down. You have to be comfortable, because you have a lot of students in front of you and if you’re not happy with your job and you have other things on your mind that are upsetting you, it’s tough to hide those feelings. You have to feel comfortable in your workplace, and that includes how you perceive that your administrators feel about you. (Michael)

From this perspective, even the principal’s perceived impression of a teacher could be enough to alter that teacher’s classroom behaviours and methods enough to have a noticeable impact on the students and the learning environment. Participants in this group thought that leadership still had an indirect impact on school culture, and that principals could most directly change school culture by influencing teacher attitudes and improving job satisfaction.

Financial factors also influenced school culture. Ned Law reflected on one school that was so underfunded that “they had a parachute in the ceiling of the art room [be]’cause it was falling down on the kids.” This had an adverse effect on the overall culture of the school in that students felt less pride in attending such a poorly maintained facility, and they were distracted
from their learning due to safety concerns. Ned Law further elaborated that the state of the building also served as a physical representation of the profound lack of funding in all areas including essential educational supplies such as textbooks and classroom resources. All these factors drove down enrollment at the school, which only further exacerbated the financial struggles facing the school and eventually led to its closure.

Beyond financial concerns, the composition and characteristics of the teachers on staff at a school would also greatly impact a principal’s ability to enact change. Oliver stated, “if you walk into a school with a lot of older staff or younger staff, that influences it a lot more than the principal.” The age of the staff affected everything within the school from how teachers connected and interacted with each other and their students, to the methods used to deliver the curriculum in the classroom, and how extracurricular activities were run. The age of staff did not necessarily have a positive or negative impact on the school culture, but did bring unique qualities to each school in a way that principals could not easily change. Older staff brought a wealth of experience to their schools, while younger staff brought in new approaches to teaching and related to their students more easily through their proximity in age. Rapport between staff members was also a key contributor to the culture of a school. Participants discussed how support and cooperation with their fellow teachers was far more important to them than their relationship with their administrator. A healthy relationship with their colleagues not only increased their motivation to come to work, but also made them more effective teachers through resource sharing. Collegial support also increased the efficiency of extracurricular activities as teachers would work together to minimize the impact of students being pulled out of class for their additional activities.
The demographics, meaning the ethnicity, diversity, socioeconomic status, family structure and size of the student population and the school community was one of the most influential factors in shaping school culture. As phrased by one participant: “everything that happens in the greater community happens in the school” (Oliver). Many participants mirrored this sentiment, describing how their schools were frequently microcosms of the communities from which they receive students. As an example of this phenomenon, Adam detailed how as the boundaries of a school shifted and the school catchment area drew students from a different socioeconomic status, the culture shifted as well. “Now SB was not the best school [be]’cause when I got there I thought it was full of privileged kids from the area, lots of drugs” (Adam). The wealth or poverty of a community would influence the issues plaguing it, and those issues would manifest themselves within the school. A principal was powerless to change the financial status of their community, and so would have a limited ability to shift culture. In some cases, the culture was influenced less by the demographics and socioeconomic status of a community, and more by the culture of the student generation. Michael made a point on how “the culture of the adolescent world shifted”, particularly with the dawn of the internet and social media, this suddenly changed much of the routines and norms of teenage life. There was less separation between school- and home-life, and this impacted the functioning and mental health of many students. Again, this powerful force played a significant role affecting the culture within schools and fell far outside of the influence of school principals.

**External factors.** Apart from contextual elements influencing the culture of schools from within, participants also described several external factors which played a significant role in the process. Most of these forces were of a regulatory or political nature, with unions, school boards, and the ministry of education all adjusting the role of a principal within the school according to
their needs. Over time each of these agents caused shifts in culture, while often curbing principals’ authority and resulting in principals having even less of an influence on their school culture. As Oliver outlined:

The old principals – the first four principals – they taught in an era where the education act empowered the principal and expected the principal to make sure that everything in his school ran the way it was supposed to be. And you can say the same for leaders in all facets of life. We’re now publicly pleasing the public. Whereas back then they were truly public servants, trusted by the public to serve them properly. We’re no longer public servants trusted to properly serve them, they are clients who demand services we can’t deliver, and it’s a very different kind of thing. (Oliver)

The older participants recalled a time when principals were entrusted with free rein on almost all decisions related to their school, and how they were slowly stripped of their decision-making abilities with regards to curriculum, staffing, and even direction. Despite being stripped of the autonomy principals are now also being asked to perform an increased number of administrative roles that benefit the ministry or school board. Eventually, in the participants’ eyes, the principals of today became more akin to middle managers, having a broad range of responsibilities, but no real power to enact their own change:

I actually believe that right now a principal’s role is too broad and too large. It is impossible under the leadership framework to actually reasonably fulfill all of those roles. I don’t know how an administrator can be really and truly involved in curriculum development and also manage every other aspect. There’s only so many hours in a day and you cannot be CEO, the finance part of it, the actual curriculum part, the community
involvement, the political aspect that is requiring your presence at as many events as possible. (Emma)

The school board continued to add to the principals’ list of tasks, while at the same time cutting support staff and thereby further broadening the roles the principal was expected to fill. Additionally, the school board began pulling the principals out of the schools to attend meetings and promote professional development, which meant the administrators were spending less time in their own schools and thereby missing valuable opportunities to connect with their staff and students. This tremendous number of tasks to accomplish, combined with continual demands on their time, led to many leaders becoming overwhelmed and delegating parts of their workload onto their teachers. This caused resentment on the part of the staff since they felt they were being taken advantage of and being unfairly treated by an absentee leader. To further exacerbate the growing rift between teachers and administrators, participants felt the government intentionally pulled principals out of the teachers’ union around this time. This caused a huge shift in the school culture, as Oliver recalled, “administrators no longer [felt] part of the staff”. Once the principals were isolated both professionally and socially, it became harder for them to form positive relationships with their staff, and caused them to become less effective leaders, often despite their best efforts:

Post Mike Harris it started to be that I’d go to a heads meeting and we’d spend an hour and a half there and look ‘hey, what did we just do, where are we going?’ have a lot of talk about action, things like that, but more top down, this is what you need to do, this is where we’re going to go next. But it never went beyond that, just talk. It almost seemed like in recent years, every year there was something new the board was pushing; or
specifically, when they started becoming goal oriented – create a goal and talk about [it], and come June, put it away. (Gabriel)

Due to the intentional divisions being put in place by various political forces, participants felt that principals could no longer easily lead through relationships and the empowerment of their staff. Moreover, they were being given vague goals to unilaterally impose upon their schools by the school board with no true direction or follow-up. This compounded participants’ feelings of top-down, dictatorial leadership and led to more resentment and an ever-deepening fracture in the principal-teacher relationship.

As a result of this strained relationship, teachers put pressure on their unions to strip further power away from the principals, to the point that even the decisions on who to interview and hire for positions within the school were no longer in the principal’s control. Oliver spoke of conversations he had recently had with friends who are still principals: “they tell me all the time, ‘I used to be able to choose who I wanted, now I’m just being told who’s coming to teach’”. Being incapable of choosing their own school staff has left very little power in the hands of the principal, thereby limiting their ability to enact changes and influence school culture.

In summation, this combination of contextual and external factors has severely weakened the influence a principal can exert on the culture of their school, while in and of itself dramatically altering the school culture and functioning in its own right. Participants were quick to note that each school has its own unique culture independent of a principal’s influence, due in large part to the contextual elements of its history, traditions, and demographics. Of these elements, the rapport and cooperation between staff members was seen to be a key contributor to the immersing culture of a school. Beyond this, the external influence of regulatory and political
forces was perceived to acutely diminish a principal’s autonomy and capacity to enact meaningful change.

Chapter Summary

This section presented and described the major themes which emerged from the data following comprehensive analysis of the individual interviews. The themes were: a) effective school leadership; b) ineffective school leadership; and c) factors mitigating the influence of school leadership on school culture. Overall, veteran teachers’ perspectives on effective principals ran counter to the stereotypical view of a leader. Instead of gravitating towards a commander with a strong personality and lofty aspirations, it was found that participants valued more personable, supportive leaders who would advocate for the common good and were genuinely dedicated to their school communities. Though principals were felt to have an influence on the culture of their schools, external factors such as the demographics of a school community and the political forces at play significantly limited the scope of this influence. Ultimately, school culture was seen as a multifaceted entity whose effects would be felt most acutely by the student body and as such demand more exploration. The following chapter will explore the implications of these findings in relation to the research questions and draw upon relevant literature in order to expand the discussion.
Chapter Five

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions

This chapter offers an overview of the study and research question that guided the research, followed by a discussion of the results coupled with relevant literature to highlight key findings and substantiate resulting implications as well as suggested best practices.

Overview of the Study

This study intended to address a gap in the current literature pertaining to the perspective of veteran teachers on the issue of how leadership practices influence school culture in the secondary school setting. To this end, the research question was:

1. What are veteran teachers’ perceptions of how their past principals’ explicit and implicit leadership practices, behaviors, policies, styles, and strategies impacted school culture?

This study used a qualitative approach to methodology, with two rounds of open-ended, semi-structured, individual interviews. The participants were all retired, veteran teachers who had taught for a minimum of 20 years in public education system in the province of Ontario.

Discussion

Three main themes emerged from the analysis of the data: a) effective school leadership, which aligned with authentic and transformational leadership models; b) ineffective school leadership, consistent with models of irresponsible leadership; and c) factors mitigating the influence of school leadership on school culture. Each theme is explored in-depth, then compared and contrasted with extant literature, in the subsequent sections.

Effective School Leadership

Participating veteran teachers perceived principals to be effective when they exhibited features of Northhouse’s (2016) three perspectives of authentic leadership and Leithwood and
Jantzi’s (2006) three dimensions of practice of transformational leadership in education. In general, effective leadership involved the principal showing a genuine interest in their school community—from simple gestures such as being physically present and visible during the school day, to more substantial actions such as willingly sacrificing opportunities for personal gain or improved promotion chances for the sake of the school. These principals were perceived as effective by being role models who led by example, modeling their expectations of the students and staff through their actions as well as their words, and by providing ample support to all who were willing to follow their lead (Karada & Oztekin, 2018; Stolp, 1994; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Whenever an issue arose, these principals would deal with it in a private and constructive manner, respecting the dignity of the affected parties and continuing to nurture a supportive and collaborative climate. This collaborative mindset extended far beyond disciplinary actions, rather it was all encompassing and was reflected in how they approached all aspects of their leadership position including problem-solving and decision-making. An effective leadership practice, as perceived by participants and supported by the literature, was adopting a team mentality rather than a paternalistic, top-down approach (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Szcesiul & Huizenga, 2014). This quickly made teachers feel respected and empowered, thereby creating a more cohesive culture in the school. These principals also led through their experience within the field, drawing upon their years as teachers to appropriately empathize with their staff. Additionally, these leaders displayed strong personal attributes like integrity and assertiveness, which contributed to their establishment and nurturing of positive relationships with all members of their school community. A principal who could develop a sense of camaraderie with their staff through their personal and professional interactions was considered a key contributor to the positive culture of a school (Lambersky, 2016; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Szcesiul & Huizenga, 2014).
**Authentic leadership characteristics.** The findings of this study were consistent with the literature regarding the three perspectives of authentic leadership: the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, and the developmental perspectives (Northouse, 2016). In accordance with the intrapersonal perspective, study participants believed that effective principals possessed innate qualities that marked them out as leaders, pursued leadership positions to make a difference rather than for personal gain, and possessed the ability to accurately and reliably self-evaluate and acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses in order to adjust to better serve their followers (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Gardner et al., 2011; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Waite et al., 2014). For the innate qualities of a leader, participants were drawn to principals who displayed characteristics of yet another model of leadership, servant leadership. These leaders were seen as empowering, humble, personable and responsible, displaying stewardship towards their school by choosing service and the needs of others above control and self-interest (Van Dierendonck, 2011). They also exhibited positive character traits such as loyalty, honesty, integrity and empathy, and most importantly, they were genuine in their interactions with all members of the school community (Van Dierendonck, 2011). These traits were seen as being part of the principal’s personality, and could only be acquired or improved if the principal possessed the motivation and willingness “to have a positive impact where [they] work, as opposed to the motivation being to impress those who are supervising [them]” (Emma). When a principal was genuinely committed to collaborating and improving their school community, it was felt not only by the teachers, but by the students as well. It inspired pride in belonging and a more impassioned school spirit. Consistent with previous studies, this sense of belonging was in turn believed to result in a decrease in instances of rule breaking and misbehaving as students were more compelled and willing to conform to the norms of their community (Cemalcilar, 2010;
Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012). With respect to the leader’s initial motivation for applying to the role of principal, participants unanimously felt the most effective principals were those who wanted to use the role for the greater good, hoping to utilize their position of power and influence to reach more of the community and have a positive impact. Finally, in terms of accurate self-reflection, the findings showed that participants praised principals who were assertive with respect to matters that they had the knowledge and skills to be making informed decisions about, while being open to collaboration and delegation in areas where they lacked expertise. This willingness to be both decisive and collaborative fostered a strong team mentality and inevitably led to a more positive and sustainable school culture (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Szcesiul & Huizenga, 2014).

The second tenet of authentic leadership is the interpersonal perspective. The main facets of the interpersonal perspective that were supported by the findings include strong relationship building skills and reciprocity within the connections principals made, as well as a resonance between the principals’ values and their followers’ beliefs (Eagly, 2005; Liu et al., 2015). The relational aspect of effective leadership cannot be overstated. During their interviews, all participants discussed the importance of a principal’s ability to establish and nurture positive relationships with all stakeholders. In fact, comradery between the principal and their staff was mentioned repeatedly as being paramount to a positive school culture, and an element which was becoming rarer in recent years due to changes in board and union policies that limited the degree to which principals and teachers could interact. That being said, despite recent restrictions, any principal who took the time to get to know their staff immediately became a more effective leader because they also gained the distinct advantage of knowing where to place each individual when it came time to decide teaching assignments. A principal who forged genuine relationships
with their staff was aware of the personal and professional characteristics of individuals and could engineer course schedules that capitalized on the strengths of as many teachers as possible, resulting in staff who were happier and more motivated, ultimately providing students with a better quality education (Drace, 2019; Karada & Oztekin, 2018). Participants also reflected on how this sense of camaraderie would inevitably lead to more buy-in from the teachers to reciprocate and support the principal in any ventures they might suggest. Resonance between principals’ values and followers’ beliefs was usually achieved through the principal modeling the attitudes and behaviours they expected from their staff through their own actions (Karada & Oztekin, 2018; Stolp, 1994). Setting the tone and providing a consistent example of their expectations was perceived to be more authentic, and as such, influenced more students and staff to follow the lead of the principal and fall into line (Eagly, 2005; Hassan & Ahmed, 2011).

Finally, the findings supported several features of the developmental perspective of authentic leadership, including: transparency in principals’ practices; fostering self-awareness and motivation in their followers; avoiding favoritism while being open to opposing viewpoints; and being guided by strong, internalized moral standards (Gardner et al., 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2008; Walumbwa & Wernsing, 2013). Transparency in principals’ practices was achieved through open and consistent communication with all stakeholders of the school community regarding both the day-to-day functioning of the school, as well as the principal’s vision and goals for the school’s future. This also required the principal to provide evidence that they had the community’s best interests in mind when dealing with the school board, advocating for the needs of their school, and not simply bending to the demands of senior administration.

Participants felt principals could motivate staff by including them in the decision-making processes within the school and thereby empowering them with the awareness that their opinions
mattered and that they could play a role in influencing the future of their school. Avoiding favoritism along with strong moral standards was also very important. Many participants spoke favourably of past principals who they viewed as fair or equitable in their dealings with staff regarding support or even budget allocation. On the opposite end of the spectrum, a breach of trust, whether through favoritism or direct dishonesty, quickly led to a breakdown of the principal-teacher relationships within the school and a rapid degradation towards a negative and toxic school culture.

**Transformational leadership characteristics.** The descriptions of effective school leaders within the findings also resonated with many of Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2006) dimensions of practice of transformational leadership in education, namely, the three broad categories of ‘redesigning the organization’, ‘developing people’, and ‘setting directions’. First, development of a collaborative school culture tied directly to Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2006) idea of ‘redesigning the organization’ framework. Transformational leadership relies on empowerment of followers, and an open and collaborative culture was repeatedly described by participants as the means through which they felt empowered. When participants perceived that their opinions and ideas were truly being considered by the principal, or that they occasionally impacted the functioning of the school, they reported feeling more satisfied and useful in their workplace, thereby more willing to commit more of their time and energy into assuring the students’ needs were being met.

Second, the dimension of ‘developing people’, which Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) described, also connected strongly to the four transformational leadership factors that Bass (1998) had originally outlined. The first of these factors, charismatic leadership, referred to the innate qualities an effective principal possessed, such as honesty and integrity. These qualities
were described in detail in this discussion in the above section regarding authentic leadership. The second factor, inspirational motivation, involved motivating followers to reach beyond their status quo and to push themselves to greater heights. Participants spoke of how a principal could inspire this level of motivation by having a clear vision for their school, having a realistic plan or strategy to achieve that vision, being a constant and visible presence within the building, and advocating strongly for the needs of their community above all else. When a principal was perceived to have effectively met these criteria, it bestowed the staff with a greater sense of pride, and they were inspired to take on additional responsibilities to assist in enacting positive and lasting change within their school. Bass’ (1998) third factor, intellectual stimulation, involved the principal encouraging and supporting followers to find creative solutions to current problems, while having a willingness to adapt and be open to new ideas. This was identified by participants as having been achieved when the staff felt fully supported in all their endeavors, from obtaining the physical resources needed to aid in classroom teaching, to reinforcement of their positions when dealing with parents in matters of discipline. When teachers believed that the principal was on their side, they experienced a significant decline in feelings of anxiety and stress, and could confidently venture beyond regular lesson planning to begin taking creative risks in their teaching in an attempt to differentiate and improve their practice. Lastly, the fourth factor, individualized consideration, involved a principal tailoring their interactions to each staff member to best suit their needs, forging stronger and deeper relationships. A principal could achieve this when they took the time to develop a sense of fellowship with their staff. As several participants pointed out, an effective principal needed to be a people person, not simply a task or outcome driven person. Knowledge of each teacher’s unique skillset meant that the principal
could work to develop timetables that played to the strengths of each staff member as much as possible, resulting in more positive outcomes for the whole school community.

The last of Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2006) dimensions of transformational leadership in education was ‘setting direction’, which involved the principal creating a shared vision for the school through collaboration with all stakeholders, as well as communicating high expectations to all and inspiring their followers to meet those expectations in their practices. The findings supported this literature as participants regularly mentioned that seeking input and feedback, and involving teachers at a personal and individual level in the creation of future plans for the school enabled the staff to feel as though their opinions were valued and respected. This also avoided the pushback and conflict that inevitably arises from unilateral decision-making. Furthermore, as previously mentioned within this section, role modeling of expectations by the principal was viewed favourably by participants and resulted in more comprehensive teacher compliance than would be seen if a principal simply outlined those expectations without displaying them themselves.

Interestingly, there was a discordance between the findings of this study and the literature with respect to the degree to which the principal could exert their influence on the school culture. The literature postulates that leaders who exhibit authentic and/or transformational practices will be capable of exerting a strong and lasting influence on their school’s culture, while also positively impacting student achievement and outcomes (Drace, 2019; Karada & Oztekin, 2018; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Liu et al., 2015). Participants, however, were quick to point out that though a principal’s practices could modestly shift the school culture in a certain direction, oftentimes this influence was severely mitigated, or occasionally negated entirely by external
factors such as government policies and societal influences. This will be explored in more detail in the third section of this discussion.

**Ineffective School Leadership**

Principals were perceived to be ineffective school leaders when their practices and qualities ran counter to the traits typically associated with authentic and transformational leaders. In fact, their practices share much in common with models of pseudo-transformational and irresponsible leadership (Bass, 1998; Martins & Lazzarin, 2019; Oplatka, 2016; Pearce, Wassenaar, & Manz, 2014). In general, ineffective principals were primarily concerned with their own career advancement or ‘ladder-climbing’. Their lofty aspirations led to them associating themselves with school initiatives and areas that were experiencing some form of success, while at the same time neglecting issues in the school community that were struggling or in need of support. Due to the principal’s obsession with self-promotion, many aspects of proper leadership fell by the wayside. The principal did not communicate clear expectations when implementing new policies and practices within the school, was seldom visible in the school community due to their desire to spend more time with their superiors, and often used favoritism as a means to promote their self-serving projects. This led to a hollow school culture due to the principal’s disingenuous nature. This self-promotion typically also manifested itself in the leader’s individualistic and control-based approach to leadership. It was difficult for the principal to establish positive and reciprocal relationships with their staff due to their rigid, micromanaging, and unsupportive approach. Moreover, when a principal was perceived to have broken the trust of their staff through dishonest or inappropriate behaviours, the school culture became toxic and difficult to reconcile. Any attempts to positively shift the culture or implement new polices/practices were met with resistance and disdain by staff.
**Irresponsible leadership characteristics.** The practices participants perceived to be ineffective on the part of school leadership closely mirror Oplatka’s (2016) five features of irresponsible leadership. The first feature of irresponsible leadership is a narrow view of education. According to Oplatka (2016), irresponsible leaders view student achievement as the main outcome of the schooling process and thereby focus most of their attention and efforts on outcomes – exam performance and grades – as a means to increase the image of the school in the public eye, usually while neglecting social issues and weaker students. The social and emotional wellbeing of students was not perceived to be a quantifiable outcome, thus was viewed as pulling attention away from successful performances and grades, and consequently not worthy of the principal’s time. Several participants mentioned cases in which the principal would take this exclusive focus on outcomes to the extreme and intentionally block or at least severely undercut the formation of clubs, particularly those that were associated with potentially controversial social issues such as LGBTQ+ rights. The possibility of controversy meant that the existence of these clubs could be damaging to the image and reputation of the school and were therefore restricted through any means possible.

The second feature of irresponsible leadership is a business-like view of the student, whereby the leaders care less about the greater good and more about attracting ‘successful’ students to their school, again to raise their public standing (Oplatka, 2016). These leaders tend to neglect supporting their teachers in favour of taking the side of the students and parents in order to satisfy their needs and keep up favourable public appearances regardless of negative internal school culture consequences (Lareau & Munoz, 2012; Oplatka, 2016). Participants mentioned many cases in which past ineffective school leaders would mishandle discipline issues; either by avoiding personal involvement in the issue at all costs, or by siding with the
parent or student despite knowing the teacher is in the right. In all cases, participants felt the lack of support was not a simple case of poor decision-making or willful ignorance, but grounded in the principal’s concern for protecting their public image and avoiding confrontation or controversy. These acts were viewed as a betrayal by the staff and quickly led to breakdowns in the principal-teacher relationships within the school. Moreover, participants stated that this caused them to avoid involving the principal in future disciplinary matters, or worse yet, to turn a blind eye to students’ misbehaviours since they felt powerless to impose consequences. The school culture would gradually become more toxic as students realized they could get away with rule breaking, and would push the limits of misbehaviour in a continuous negative feedback loop (Hargreaves, 2011).

According to Oplatka (2016), the third feature irresponsible leaders possess is a narcissistic and ego-centrist view. They are intolerant of criticism, unwilling to compromise, and motivated by their need to promote their image and status (Maccoby, 2012; Oplatka, 2016). As such, they tend to surround themselves with staff who admire and flatter them, and regularly manipulate their followers in order to achieve their personal goals (De Wet, 2013; Oplatka, 2016). Their workplace is rife with broken trust. These traits were all supported in participants’ perspectives of ineffective school principals. A principal who saw their position as transitory on the path towards higher rank within the educational field was often neglectful of much of the minutia of the day-to-day functioning of their school in favour of grandiose acts and public spectacles which they could use to improve their resume and reputation. This neglect for the basic needs of their school community, coupled with preferential treatment exclusively for staff who supported their self-serving initiatives resulted in a divisive school community, and quickly eroded collegiality and motivation. The consequences of the principal’s egocentrism would first
take the form of diminishing extracurricular involvement by the teachers, who felt slighted by the blatant favouritism and hollow practices. Participants noted that since extracurriculars are some of the few roles which are not contractually mandated, stepping back from extracurricular activities is often the first outward display of resistance from teachers. Less teacher involvement inevitably led to fewer sports and clubs being offered at the school and eroded the culture and spirit of the school. As school pride diminished, so did both participation and attendance in the remaining extracurriculars. In cases where the increasingly negative school culture was left unchecked, the classroom environment could also experience detrimental effects.

Following the narcissistic traits, the fourth feature of irresponsible leadership is self-centered decision-making (Oplatka, 2016). Many decisions made by irresponsible leaders lack moral grounding. Furthermore, out of fear of endangering their status, these leaders often refrain from taking risks. Instead, they rely on directions from their superiors even if those directions do not fit the needs of their schools (Khalifa; 2012; Oplatka, 2016). This makes these principals more akin to managers than actual leaders. Participants’ responses echoed the literature as they consistently divulged that ineffective principals would seldom advocate for their school’s needs to the board, and in some cases would prioritize board initiatives above all else as a means of augmenting their own status to their superiors. This desire to fulfill any and all board initiatives would have many negative consequences. Firstly, an increase in the principal’s time spent mingling with their superiors at the board office meant a decrease in leadership presence within their school. This absence of leadership was directly felt by both staff and students and began to cause a shift in the culture of the school. Participants spoke of how a leader’s physical absence from the building was often perceived as a lack of interest or concern for the school and could diminish school spirit and pride. This was particularly noticeable when the principal would not
communicate the reasons for their absences, or would make obvious attempts to understate their time away from the school. Moreover, a lack of physical presence in the school was prohibitive to building relationships between the principal and members of the school community. Secondly, a principal who took on too many board initiatives would inevitably become overwhelmed and delegate additional responsibilities to their staff as a means of self-preservation. This increase in secondary responsibilities restricted teachers’ capacity to independently choose how best to serve their school community, and led to loss of motivation and resentment. Finally, a principal’s unwillingness to advocate for their school meant that the specific needs and challenges of their school community would often be ignored or severely underfunded. Participants reported that teachers and students alike would grow increasingly frustrated by the lack of support and services tailored to their specific needs, and the overall school culture would become progressively more toxic.

Lastly, Opaltka (2016) states that irresponsible leaders lack emotional awareness and tend to have poor emotional regulation. These leaders lack the ability to empathize, energize, foster creativity, or respond appropriately to situations of conflict or distress (Oplatka, 2016). Due to this lack of empathy, they are unsupportive of their staff, both cognitively and emotionally (Bickmore & Dowell, 2018; Oplatka, 2016). This lack of support eventually stifles creativity within their schools. This element of irresponsible leadership was supported by the findings of this study in several ways. Participants discussed how teachers are most effective when they truly enjoy their job, and that principals play a major role in influencing that job satisfaction. When a teacher perceived that their principal did not like or care about them, they became less comfortable in their role. Subsequently, their teaching would be negatively impacted. If they felt unsupported by their principal, participants reported being far less inclined to take creative risks
in their instruction styles and to tailor their lessons to the needs of their students. Beyond this, a principal who was unable to empathize with staff about the challenges they faced day to day was seen as cold and distant. This would erode the staff’s motivation to come to work or to deliver their curriculum in an enthusiastic and passionate way. A principal who possessed poor emotional control would also be more likely to lead in a controlling and fear-based manner, which inhibited the formation of positive relationships between themselves and their school community, and further the trend towards a negative school culture. Unfortunately, persistent irresponsible leadership could culminate in increased burnout among teachers, leading many of them to abandon the profession due to the unfulfilling and negative environment (Bickmore & Dowell, 2018; Gaines, 2011). This was an outcome that was witnessed by several of the study participants amongst their peers.

All of the facets of irresponsible leadership are mirrored in Bass’ (1998) pseudo-transformational leadership model, where a principal uses their charisma and charm to transform the culture of their schools, but in a negative and self-serving way (Bass, 1998; Northouse, 2016). This form of leadership is self-consumed, exploitative, and power-oriented with a warped moral code (Bass, 1998; Northouse, 2016). Participants often spoke of how the most ineffective principals would manipulate any circumstance so that they would receive recognition for accomplishments, regardless of whether they had played a significant role in the event, while at the same time avoiding responsibility and shifting blame for any challenges or failures faced by their school. This duplicity in their practices was quickly recognized and damaged any future relationship building or collaboration potential.

The irresponsible leadership theory concludes that irresponsible leaders result in unethical school climates in which the teachers do not empathize with their students and begin to
emulate their principals’ behaviours (Oplatka, 2016). Interestingly, this conclusion was not supported by the findings of this study. Participants did report feeling less motivated to come to work and less willing to take risks when they were unsupported or at odds with their principal, but this influence was usually mitigated by having supportive colleagues or a strong school culture which could withstand the negative influence of an ineffective leader, especially if the leader was only present for a short length of time. Some participants went as far as to state that it did not matter who the leader was, as long as the other teachers and school staff were positive and supportive of one another, and the external factors influencing the school stayed consistent, then the culture of the school would remain positive and continue to nurture a quality educational climate. This will be explored in more detail in the following section.

**Factors Mitigating the Influence of School Leadership on School Culture**

Regardless of how authentic and transformational a school principal was, the study participants believed that their influence was severely constrained by the context and external factors which surrounded them (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). Namely, these factors include the unique culture and demographical composition of each school, and the social and political forces that impact the school community both from within the school system and externally.

These findings are supported by a wealth of literature. Many participants noted that each school has its own unique culture, shaped largely by its history and traditions, as well as the demographics of both the staff, students and the whole school community (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Tlusciak-Deliowska, Dernowska, & Gruenert, 2017). Depending on how these contextual factors have come together and how ingrained they are in the school’s culture, a principal’s power to influence or enact change could be rendered negligible (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Rintoul & Bishop, 2019). Of the many contextual factors listed, participants described how
rapport between staff members was a key contributor to the culture of a school. The support and cooperation of their fellow teachers was far more important to staff than their relationship with their administrator (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). Similarly, in this study, participants discussed how they interact far more with their colleagues during their day-to-day practice than with the principal, and as such were more likely to be influenced by their fellow teachers. Moreover, it was their colleagues, not the principal, who would collaborate with them to create and share resources, run extracurriculars and exchange strategies on dealing with troublesome students. A principal would play a role in approving budgets, activities, and changing policies, but their presence and influence could largely be ignored or avoided if it did not resonate with the culture that the teachers were maintaining (Rintoul & Bishop, 2019). As such, a principal must work within the confines of the environment they have been placed in, and adapt their practices to fit the needs of that specific school if they are to be accepted and enabled to achieve positive change (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2017).

Beyond contextual elements, the influence of political and regulatory forces can also severely hamper a principal’s authority and ability to effect change (Goodwin, Cunningham, & Childress, 2003; Rintoul & Bishop, 2019). In Ontario, the influence of teachers’ unions, the government, school boards and parent groups on decisions regarding policies and practices of school leadership, have effectively relegated principals to the role of a middle-manager rather than a leader (Rintoul & Bishop, 2019; Williams, 2003). Principals have been burdened with countless administrative roles and responsibilities, but are bereft of autonomy in terms of actual leadership decisions such as staffing choices and goal setting for the future direction of their schools (Beausaert, Froehlich, Devos, & Riley, 2016; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Rintoul & Bishop, 2019). One need only look back through the history of Ontario’s educational reforms to
see how policies and legislature systemically targeted and eroded a principal’s autonomy, while at the same time underprioritized the training and development programs for incoming principals, resulting in a powerless and diminishing pool of effective leaders in the educational field (Williams, 2003). From the 1990s, the trend in education in Ontario has been towards increased centralization, shifting power from schools and school boards towards the provincial government as a means to save money and increase efficiency (Li, 2015). The Mike Harris-led conservative government forced the amalgamation of numerous school boards in 1997, which resulted in fewer boards serving larger geographical areas, and weakened the links between the boards and the communities they served. In that same year, the government removed principals and vice-principals from teachers’ unions, a move which participants unanimously agreed drove a wedge between teachers and leadership and severely damaged their ability to collaborate or even form positive relationships. Beyond this, in 2009 the Ministry of Education introduced Bill 177 which further centralized Ontario’s educational decision-making, this time with respect to the government’s role in creating and upholding school and student performance standards (Li, 2015). In general, most ‘leadership’ duties, from control over finances, to staffing decisions and even accountability measures, were centralized due to economic, social, and political overhauling (Rintoul & Bishop, 2019; Wallace, 2001). As is evident from the historical accounts described, principals have been caught in the middle of a decades-long power struggle between the Ontario government and educators. This has rendered their work environment less and less appealing and led to higher rates of burnout and early retirement amongst leadership (Beausaert et al., 2016; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Williams, 2003). This combination of external factors has also severely weakened the influence a principal can exert on the culture of their school,
while in and of itself dramatically altering the school culture and functioning in its own right (Fullan, 2018; Rintoul & Bishop, 2019; Williams, 2003).

Though the political landscape and influence of the school board was not a focus of this study, nor was it specifically asked about during the interview sessions, it was a topic that was continually referenced by participants and as such deserved discussion due to its perceived importance. Deal and Peterson (2016) distinguish leadership from management by arguing that leadership creates and changes cultures, while management and administration act within a culture. Through these mitigating factors and educational policies, we are beginning to see principals being devalued and limited to acting within their school culture rather than having the power and influence to create and shape it (Rintoul & Bishop, 2019; Wallace, 2001).

**Research Implications**

Research findings offer several implications for theory, practice, and further research. Theoretically, this study provides further support to the practices described within authentic, transformational, and irresponsible leadership models, while offering a difference of opinion in terms of the conclusions drawn by each of these models. Practically, positive leadership practices were perceived to be more influential than negative practices, teachers viewed themselves as the gatekeepers of school culture, and reduced autonomy rendered a principal’s potential influence nearly negligible. By understanding how veteran teachers perceive the leadership practices observed in past principals, future principals can be more effectively trained to lead, enact change in their schools, and improve student success.

**Implications for Theory**

The findings of this study align closely with the three perspectives of leadership described in the authentic, transformational, and irresponsible leadership models. For both
authentic and transformational leadership, many elements identified were consistent with the literature. Participants placed a particular emphasis on collaboration, relationship-building, follower empowerment, transparency, and positive character traits, as the fundamental components of an effective principal. A similar trend was seen for irresponsible leadership, where the overall practices adhered to Oplatka’s (2016) model quite well, with the findings highlighting three specific qualities in ineffective principals: self-serving, unempathetic, and disempowering as being the key contributors to their poor leadership. Where the findings differed from these models was in the degree of influence these leadership practices could exert on the school culture and community. The literature postulates that school leaders will not only play a major role in shaping their school’s culture but also affect student achievement (Drace, 2019; Karada & Oztekin, 2018; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Liu et al., 2015; Oplatka, 2016). However, the findings within this study suggest that this influence, at least locally, is significantly less potent than the literature argues, as a principal’s impact was perceived to be severely mitigated, or occasionally even negated, by external factors such as government policies and societal influences.

**Implications for Practice**

Several recommendations for best practices stem from the findings. First, participants were unanimous in their perception that positive leadership practices had more of an effect on school culture than negative practices. If participants resonated with the transformational and authentic leadership practices of their principals, they would be far more open to any influence the principal would exert. This ultimately was the deciding factor in the maintenance or change of school culture as teachers perceived themselves as the most influential party in dictating school culture (Rintoul & Bishop, 2019). Additionally, it was believed that principals’ lack of
autonomy secondary to Ministry regulations has eroded any true ability to enact change within a school. This autonomy is invaluable as it allows principals to advocate for their individual school and school community needs, rather than having to conform to board and ministry ‘umbrella policies’ that cannot be customized to each school’s needs (Earley & Greany, 2017). As such, implementing policies to increase school principals’ autonomy to enable them to truly be school leaders and effect change within their schools is a necessary and relatively low risk choice. What a principal needs to succeed and be truly effective in establishing and maintaining a positive school culture is a visible presence within the school, unwavering support both in terms of resources and empathy, and an ability to forge trusting relationships through transparent communication and leading with integrity (Fullan, 2010; Walker, Kutsyuruba, & Noonan, 2011). Interestingly, literature has shown that principals who improve their school culture and establish positive relationships with their school community are likely to experience the additional side effect of decreasing their own stress levels and likelihood of burnout (Beausaert et al., 2016).

Furthermore, special attention should be paid to the hiring and vetting process for principals, as well as their training and certifications, so as to identify leaders who may require additional supports and training with respect to effective leadership practices prior to commencing a principalship. Principals should strive to be authentic in their practices and can enact positive and lasting change through the empowerment of, and collaboration with, their staff and students.

**Implications for Further Research**

More research should be undertaken to explore how principals can best exert a positive influence on their schools while working within the confines of the mitigating factors of their environments. The strength and influence of those mitigating factors, including but not limited to
the social and political forces at play within a school and education system, and the deterioration of principal autonomy stemming from ministry and union policies, should merit special attention. The quality and efficacy of principal training and certification programs, as well as professional development opportunities for school leaders should also be explored and evaluated in greater detail. Further research should also be undertaken into determine if some leadership traits and behaviours are more responsive to training and if some are innate personality dimensions that cannot be changed and should therefore be screened against.

Research Limitations

Limitations of this study included a relatively small sample size, limited diversity in the participant characteristics due to snowball sampling and the uniform demographics from which the participants were recruited. The methodology used in the research, namely semi-structured interviews, prevented participants from being completely anonymous, and as such could have influenced responses. The impact of external education policies on principals’ practices and participants’ experiences must also be considered. For these reasons, the findings of this study are difficult to generalize to other districts, let alone other countries where the policies, demographics, and cultural elements may significantly alter the effects observed here. Furthermore, recent research has exposed differences in how Millennials respond to leadership practices compared to previous generations, which may impact the application of this study’s findings to younger generations of teachers (Anderson, Baur, Griffith, & Buckley, 2017).

Concluding Comments

Veteran teachers’ perspectives on the influence of leadership on school culture in the secondary setting closely mirrored that of the literature. Authentic, transformational, and collaborative principals were perceived as being effective and empowering in their practices, and
capable of achieving positive results. Interestingly, very few participants discussed principals who were neither completely effective or ineffective leaders, displaying how positive and negative practices leave a more lasting impression than neutrality. Ultimately, it was perceived to be the teachers, and in a broader sense, the greater school community, who were the true agents of change within the school culture.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Information and Consent Form

Study Title: Veteran teachers' perceptions of school principals' explicit and implicit leadership influence on school culture within the secondary school setting.

Name of Student Researcher: Maciej Gebczynski, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University

Name of Supervisor: Dr. Alana Butler, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University

I am Maciej Gebczynski, a master’s student in the Faculty of Education, working under the supervision of Dr. Alana Butler. I am inviting retired teachers who have practiced for over 15 years to take part in a research study looking at their perceptions of school principals’ leadership influences on school culture. If you agree to take part, I will interview you for 30-45 minutes on two separate occasions at a public location you choose. The interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. There is a small chance that questions in this study may cause you to relive negative past experiences, and as such, sample questions have been included with this letter to prepare you for the types of questions you will be asked. While there are no direct benefits to you as a participant, study results will help inform how principals could tailor their leadership in order to maximize benefits to all stakeholders in their schools.

There is no obligation for you to say yes to take part in this study. You don’t have to answer any questions you don’t want to. You can stop participating at any time without penalty. You may withdraw from the study up until February 1st, 2019 by contacting me at 16mg68@queensu.ca.

I will keep your data securely for at least five years and then securely destroy it. Your confidentiality will be protected to the extent possible by replacing your name, and the names of all principals, co-workers, and schools identified, with pseudonyms for all data and in all publications. The code list linking real names with pseudonyms will be recorded in a notebook and stored separately and securely from the data in a locked file cabinet. No one other than myself will have access to any of the data.

I hope to publish the results of this study in my master’s thesis and academic journals and present them at conferences. I will include quotes from some of the interviews when presenting my findings. However, I will never include any real names with quotes, and I will do my best to make sure quotes do not include information that could indirectly identify participants. During the interviews, please let me know if you say anything you do not want me to quote.

For taking part in this research, you will receive a $10 Tim Horton’s gift card.
Here are a few sample questions to give you an idea of the types of questions you will be asked during the interview process:

1. Did you notice a difference in school culture (the traditions, values, norms, routines) at the various schools in which you taught?
2. Did you notice a culture change at any point while you were teaching at the same school?
3. Can you identify any principals who directly influenced the culture of your school in either a positive or negative manner throughout your career?

On the day of your interview, providing any artifacts such as email communications or staff meeting minutes, which could serve to reinforce the influence of the policies and goals of your past administrators, would be greatly appreciated.

Would you be willing to pass along the name and contact information of any friend/family/co-worker who may be interested in participating in this study? There is no obligation for you to pass along this information, and there will be no penalty if you do not provide this information. I will be letting potential participants whom you refer know that you were the source of the referral. You also have the right to request that you are given time to notify the potential participants prior to us contacting them.

☐ YES  ☐ NO.

If you have any ethics concerns, please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca. Call 1-613-533-2988 if outside North America.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact me, Maciej Gebczynski, at 16mg68@queensu.ca or my supervisor, Dr. Alana Butler, at alana.butler@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 ext. 75298.

This Letter of Information provides you with the details to help you make an informed choice. All your questions should be answered to your satisfaction before you decide whether or not to participate in this research study.

Keep one copy of the Letter of Information for your records and return one copy to the researcher, Maciej Gebczynski.

By signing below, I am verifying that I have read the Letter of Information and all of my questions have been answered.

Name of Participant: ___________________________________________________________

Signature: ___________________________________________________________________

Date: ______________________________________________________________________
Appendix B: Interview guide #1

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Introduction: First of all, I’d like to thank you for taking the time out of your undoubtedly busy schedule to provide your perspective on these issues. It really means a lot to me. Before we begin, I’d just like to confirm that you do consent to be a part of this interview process (await response). Remember that your participation is voluntary and that you are free to skip any questions or stop the interview at any point if you feel so inclined. This interview is meant to explore your perceptions, as a veteran teacher, of your experiences with the influence of leadership on school culture, and to assess the potential positive and negative effects of these topics on your experiences as a teacher as a whole.

Questions:

1. How long have you been teaching?
   a. Could you please provide an overview of your work history? (the schools in which you have taught, the subjects you have taught, roughly the number of years at each school?)

2. Did you notice a difference in school culture (the traditions, values, norms, routines) at the various schools in which you taught?
   a. Can you think of a few examples of the differences you perceived?
   b. What do you think caused these differences? What would you attribute these differences to?
   c. Did this culture change at any point while you were teaching at the same school?
   d. If so, what caused this culture shift? (if not the principal's influence, how did the principal react to the change?)

3. We’ve only got a few questions left, thank you so much for your patience and thoughtful answers. Let me know if you need a break at any point. Moving on, can you identify any principals throughout your career who directly influenced the culture (again, the traditions, values, norms and routines) of the school in either a positive or negative manner?
   a. What changed?
b. What did the principal do to bring about this change?
c. What were the consequences of this culture change?
d. Did it affect your teaching in a positive or negative manner?
e. How did their leadership affect what you taught in your classrooms?
f. Describe the context in which these situations arose? What led to them exuding this influence?
g. How did this affect you?
h. How did it affect the student experience?
i. Can you think of any other examples?
j. (repeat questions for new examples)

4. Can you think of any artefacts (school slogans, memos, newsletters, etc.) that you might still have that would help to reinforce these points?
   a. Would you be able to bring them in for our next interview and describe them and how they relate to the principal’s influence on school culture?

5. Do you believe there are certain experiences/situations within which the principal should play a larger role?
   a. Could you elaborate on any example that comes to mind?

6. Last question, we’re almost there! With respect to this subject area, what is something I may have omitted asking you that you’d like to add?

Thank you so much for your time and for all the incredibly detailed information you’ve provided me with. I’ll be sure to contact you when I’m done transcribing this interview, so you can give it a read over to check and make sure everything you said comes across the way you meant it to. At that time, we’ll also negotiate a mutually convenient time to meet for a second round of interviews. In the meantime, all the best and have a great night!
Appendix C: Interview guide #2

Time of interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:

Introduction: Welcome back and thank you again for taking the time out of your day to provide your perspective on these issues. It really means a lot to me. Before we begin, I’d just like to confirm that you do consent to be a part of this interview process (await response). Remember that your participation is voluntary and that you are free to skip any questions or stop the interview at any point if you feel so inclined. This interview is meant to further explore your perceptions, as a veteran teacher, of your experiences with the influence of leadership on school culture, and to assess the potential positive and negative effects of these topics on your experiences as a teacher as a whole.

Questions:

1. First question; regarding the topic, is there anything that you’ve thought of since the last time we met that you’d like to discuss, change, or elaborate on?

2. Certain participants identified principals’ behaviours/leadership styles/abilities to adapt and respond to their school’s environment as the main causes of the changes in school culture, could you identify any specific examples of this that you experienced in your career?
   a. What was it about that specific behaviour/leadership style/ability to adapt that had such a great effect on school culture?
   b. Do you think the effect was intentional on the part of the principal, or indirect?
   c. What makes you believe that?
   d. How does that make you feel about that particular principal?
   e. Any other examples of other principals?

3. If I were to ask you to think of the best principal you worked with, what are some of the attributes that come to mind?
   a. Which of these attributes would you identify as the most important/influential?
   b. Do you think this is a learned or innate skill/trait?
   c. If I repeat the question with the worst principal and their attributes, what comes to mind?
d. What do you think was their most detrimental attribute?

e. Were they aware of their flaws? Did they change over time?

f. How could they have changed?

4. Many participants identified principals’ influence on teacher attitude and job satisfaction as a driving force behind changes in school culture. What are your thoughts on this statement?
   a. Can you elaborate on any examples that come to mind?
   b. What do you think has the greater impact on teacher satisfaction, their principal or their school culture?
   c. Why?

5. If a principal wanted to intentionally change or address an aspect of their school’s culture, how would they go about doing so in your opinion?
   a. What strategies would be useful?
   b. Who should they target?
   c. Have you observed any examples of this in your own teaching?
   d. Can you elaborate on these?

6. Many participants brought up the principal’s roles and responsibilities within the school as being quite broad. Do you think this has any impact on school culture?
   a. What aspects of a principal’s role would you change to allow them to have a more positive impact within the school?

7. With respect to this subject area, what is something I may have omitted asking you that you’d like to add?

Thank you so much for your time and for all the incredibly detailed information you’ve provided me with. I’ll be sure to contact you when I’m done transcribing this interview, so you can give it a read over to check and make sure everything you said comes across the way you meant it to. Thank you again for all your help, and do not hesitate to contact me if you have any additional comments, questions, or concerns. All the best and have a great night!